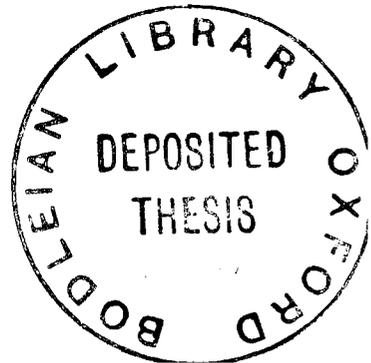


**BORDER SUBJECTS:
A TEXTUAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN ASSIA DJEBAR AND HELENE CIXOUS**

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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List of Abbreviations

AF	<i>L'Amour, la fantasia</i>
BA	<i>Le Blanc de l'Algérie</i>
DD	<i>Dedans</i>
FA	<i>Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement</i>
I	<i>Les Impatients</i>
JN	<i>Le Jour où je n'étais pas là</i>
RF	<i>Les Réveries de la femme sauvage: scènes primitives</i>
RM	'Le Rire de la méduse'

Abstract 1

The absence of a public dialogue, either about or between Assia Djébar and Hélène Cixous is mystifying, because they move in academic/literary/intellectual/biographical circles that overlap. Reading for the textual dialogue between Cixous's and Djébar's writing reveals the development of a narrative and writing position, referred to here as the 'border-subject', the roots of which stem from the authors' biographies. Reading Djébar's and Cixous's oeuvre, against the background of Françoise Lionnet's and Gloria Anzaldúa's theoretical landscape, simultaneously enlarges the critical optic as well as the scope of each individual writer's oeuvre.

What characterises the fictional border subject in *Les Impatients* and *Dedans* is a willingness to transgress boundaries. The fictional border subject negotiates with three different spatial dynamics: the separation from the other, spatial metaphors, and history's invasion of domestic space. In the subsequent 'Le Rire de la méduse' and *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, Djébar and Cixous write as border subjects in order to craft liberating strategies intended to redress the mis-representation or absence of women's body. As a consequence of the preceding texts, *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage* contain the authors' semi-autobiographical questioning of the border subject in relation to origin, language, belonging and home: this enables a re-animation of the Algerian past, both individual and collective. Lastly, in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* and *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* the border subject is put aside: although absent, the narrating 'je' remains connected with events and bears witness. This dimension of testimony represents an exciting development in the authors' oeuvre and their political commitment.

What emerges from a comparative reading is the authors' transformation of the border subject into an engagement with the Algerian present. Solidarity amongst Algerian born writers can transform literature into an indestructible repository for the dream of a multi-lingual, multi-cultural Algeria.

Border Subjects: A Textual Dialogue between Assia Djebar and Hélène Cixous
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Abstract 2

The absence of a public dialogue, either about or between Assia Djebar and Hélène Cixous is mystifying, because their articles, novels, short story collections, plays, films and opera have secured their reputations as international stars in academic/literary/intellectual/biographical circles that undoubtedly overlap. Despite the authors' marked distance, a textual dialogue between their oeuvres is present. Although there may be nothing unique about two twentieth-century women writers sharing similar thematic preoccupations, such as women, the writing self, the body, colonialism etc., reading for the dialogue between Cixous's and Djebar's oeuvres yields more than thematic coincidences: it brings to light the development of a particular narrative and writing position, referred to here as that of the 'border subject', the roots of which grow from the soil of the authors' biographies; in the space between Cixous's and Djebar's writing Algeria comes to represent both a tenacious link and an insurmountable divide.

The explicit and repeated use Cixous and Djebar make of biographical facts and events in writing signals the importance of the autobiographical for the authors' fictional writing. Most of the events which the authors return to obsessively are connected to their Algerian childhoods. French colonial Algeria as a homeland--a place distinct from today's Algeria--

appears as crucial for the authors' literary works. The contradictions of their home, a place in which Algerians and European settlers lived closely together, but were sharply separated by disparate economic conditions and privileges, ensured that the authors remain supremely conscious of the foreigner within themselves, and therefore, willing to question and provoke through subversive writing.

French Algeria shares some crucial characteristics with the 'Borderlands' identified by several Chicano critics and theorists, including Gloria Anzaldúa, and used to refer to where Mexico and the U.S. meet. In *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa elaborates how a new kind of consciousness, 'the new *mestiza*', can be developed or awakened: the new *mestiza* celebrates and draws strength from different languages and cultures, poetry and prose, switching from different codes. The border subject whose different cultures, countries and languages are typically in conflict shares the transformative possibilities of the *new mestiza*. As present in Cixous's and Djébar's oeuvre, the border subject is continually asked to choose, to divide her identity into neat categories. *Métissage*, as elaborated by François Lionnet, signals an alternative space that allows for the existence of multiple identities: Lionnet also proposes new kinds of reading, writing and living practices, principally through the investigation of autobiographical voices, that attempts to find alternative visions of the self, inclusive of multiple identities and resistant to hegemonic systems (patriarchy, colonialism, tyranny, etc.). Reading Djébar's and Cixous's oeuvres, against the background of Lionnet's and Anzaldúa's theoretical landscape and with biographical knowledge, simultaneously enlarges both the critic's optic and the scope of each individual writer's oeuvre.

Critical expectations and exhortations abounded for Cixous's and Djébar's writing, poised as they were and continue to be, between opposing cultures and languages. The delicacy of their approaches, notable in the care they took not to appropriate their subjects,

elicited a perhaps surprisingly passionate critical reception that impacted upon the authors' political and literary viewpoints. An examination of their critical reception against the backdrop of history—personal, national and textual—elucidates the making of Cixous and Djébar as literary border figures whose writing balances on the edges between genres, cultures and languages. The critical reception may be divided into two time periods: the first time period covers the critical reception of the authors' first two texts from 1950-1970, while the second spans the changes that occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s, during which the authors attracted a dramatic amount of international attention. The Algerian War and May 1968, and the authors' subsequent political activity or apparent lack of one, are examples of events that also crucially shaped their writing and critic's commentaries. This critical reception--at times vitriolic, at others effusive in its praise--also in(formed) the authors' writing. What emerges from a selective investigation of the critical commentary is that despite the generally favourable nature of their writings' reception, certain inevitable critical blind spots about the authors' texts and political stances emerge: the most significant of these include the neglect of Cixous's Algerian-ness, and Djébar's type-casting as the leading feminist lady of Francophone literature.

What characterises the fictional border subject in Cixous's and Djébar's second works *Les Impatients* and *Dedans* is a willingness to transgress sexual/spatial boundaries. The main character of *Les Impatients* daringly takes a lover, while the narrating 'je' of *Dedans* consistently defies society's expectations. The two border subjects contained in these texts--Dalila and the unnamed narrator of *Dedans*-- negotiate with three different aspects of spatial dynamics. First, the separation from the other, exemplified by Dalila's struggles to shift her homoerotic identification from her stepmother Lella to her lover, Salim. Dalila defies societal norms, resulting in violence that also liberates her, while the narrative self in *Dedans* claims both the masculine and feminine as her territory as well as the inside and the

outside. Second, Dalila and the narrating 'je' occupy a writing space in which spatial metaphors abound, signalling the interaction between inside and the outside: in part a recognition of space's importance in the formation and framing of the border subject, this emphasis on spatial metaphors also stems from the authors' conception of themselves as architects. Third, in *Dedans* and *Les Impatients* history continually invades domestic space. Ultimately, the fictional border subject makes the most of the space she inhabits: Dalila carves out her own independence by acquiring the right to step across the threshold of sexual norms but also of the house, while the narrator of *Dedans* ultimately breaks down the distinctions between inside and outside. Freer, at this point, to revel in and negotiate spatial possibilities than the authorial border subject, the fictional border subject foreshadows the woman writer's ability to move beyond the boundaries of constricting structures.

In 'Le Rire de la méduse' and *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, which appear in the authors' oeuvres as triumphant turning points, Djébar and Cixous write from the authorial position of a border subject. Here the authors use this perspective to redress the misrepresentation or absence of women's body on literary, political, and/or artistic stages and, importantly, to craft liberating strategies. Cixous's and Djébar's departure points for their analysis include the experience of colonialism, which naturally led to the authors' redefinition of the position(s) from which they see and write. For, if the appropriation of women's bodies has come about through men's privileged access to the production of representations, then a woman writers' first steps towards a viable liberating writing strategy consists of the annexation and re-definition of the seer position. The hallmark of Djébar's and Cixous's liberating, writing practices is the re-insertion of women's bodies into writing; therefore, it is through the medium of voice and the inclusion of the maternal body that they devise liberating writing strategies. Cixous's *écriture féminine* and Djébar's 'language

like a veil' exploit the border subject's vantage points, re-think the complex, unresolved relationship to the maternal body and allow for writing close to and with women's body. Ultimately, *Femmes d'Alger* pushes the argument of 'Le Rire de la méduse' in new directions by zeroing in on the specific situation of Algerian women: its careful attention to a defined group of women proved prescient with regard to the debates of post-colonial theory, much influenced by but also reacting against "French feminism".

In their pre-1980s oeuvre, Cixous and Djébar investigate the dynamics of the border subject position in fictional and semi-theoretical works: as a direct consequence of these strategies, which were primarily intended to further other women's corporal freedom, Cixous and Djébar found themselves examining the fabric of their own lives, their Algerian roots and in particular their own escape from enclosure. The authors' post-1980s fictional work, in particular *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage*, consistently incorporate explicit autobiographical and historical elements and might best be characterized as semi-autobiographical works--on the border between the fictional and factual. These two works question the border subject dynamics, through the prism of autobiographical events, in relation to origin, language, belonging and home. *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage* peruses the archives of personal memory, while Djébar--in an important distinction between the authors' projects-- looks both at her own story and at historical records; moreover, by transcribing women's stories, she creates new sources. Both works focus, however, on the authors' past, their relation to their own past and the after-effects of their Algerian childhoods. As the authors well recognise, it is important for subordinated peoples to assert their cultural traditions and retrieve their histories; however, all too often, as Homi K. Bhabha signals, in the 'calcification of colonial cultures' roots become stuck in a celebratory romance of the past or a homogenisation of the present'.¹ Thus, the border

¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 9.

subject enables the authors' alternative approaches, which share a refusal to view the past through rose-coloured glasses, and leads to a re-animation in writing of Algerian pasts, both individual and collective.

In *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* and *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, the authors transform the preoccupation with the border subject into a writing strategy in which the presence of the author/narrator/subject is no longer vital: she or he can, although absent, still remain closely connected or entangled with events and thus can bear witness. Cixous and Djébar testify through writing to events of autobiographical importance--the death of loved ones--, but these tragedies, in turn, are linked to other historical events that occurred during the participants' lives, such as the Holocaust and the French-Algerian War. If the narrators' absence from the death of their loved ones provides the trigger for the narrative, then the impelling motive for the narrator's subsequent journey is a desire to shatter the silence surrounding the past out of which grow the roots of present conflicts. *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* transforms the notion of testimony in order to comment on how events, historical and personal, both influence and shape the development of the subject, while *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* argues that writing has an ethical responsibility in the present to the past. *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* is an indirect commentary on particular political narratives, one more oblique than that contained in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, but also containing a recuperation of the past. This added dimension of testimony, which involves an authorial journey from self-obsession to self-effacement, represents an exciting development in the authors' oeuvre and underlines their commitment, in different guises, to the political present.

What emerges from a comparative reading of the authors' oeuvre is how the border subject provides the groundwork in Cixous's and Djébar's oeuvre for the authors' increasingly explicit, political engagement with the present. The authors adopt a resolutely critical, marginal position with regard to their multiple cultures, languages and

identifications. In this way, the auto/biographical is crucial to reading Cixous's and Djébar's writing: to vault over their Algerian childhoods does not do their oeuvres justice. The marked distance between H el ene Cixous and Assia Dj ebar appears as less mystifying: the development of the border subject and the subsequent adoption of a critical, marginal position with relation to one's past, history and present events are predicated on a certain distancing from others (writers, countries, languages) in order to maintain and elaborate new kinds of visions. The crucial differences in the authors' "Algerian-ness" contain an additional explanation for their reluctance to be linked together.

Moving beyond the preoccupations of the border subject, and towards a transformation of testimony into solidarity, Cixous's and Dj ebar's biographies and the half-century they have traversed alongside Algeria results in the development of two oeuvres that envision an Algerian future different from the present. To enable the actualisation of her vision, Dj ebar calls on Algerian born writers to stop writing about the colonial past of their childhoods and instead to write about Algeria in light of the present situation. In a similar gesture, Cixous comes to the conclusion that if she does not share a past with her Algerian sisters, then there is nonetheless room for her alongside them in dreaming a future for Algeria without violence. Thus, the combination of Cixous's and Dj ebar's literary voices in a dialogue--one in which each remains distinct--results in a new poetics that draws from both Dj ebar's and Cixous's writing. Solidarity amongst Algerian born writers reminds Algerians and also the global audience of what risks being forgotten: thus literature becomes an indestructible repository for the dream of a multi-lingual, multi-cultural Algeria.

1

Introduction

I would go back and forth between Paris and Algiers, thinking all the time about the possibility of a dialogue between a European woman and an Algerian one, its modalities.

Assia Djebar¹

Two women writers, who are undoubtedly amongst the most talented women to emerge from North Africa in the past century--the breadth of their interests, mediums and their numerous literary awards testifies to this--begin their intellectual trajectories in French colonial Algeria. Born just one year apart, they attend Lycée Bugeaud, a *hypokhâgne* for boys in Algiers, leave for Paris during the French-Algerian War and publish some of their most influential books, which are consistently oriented towards women---women's subjectivity, sexuality, oppression, and liberation---with the same maverick French publisher (*des femmes*). Given these biographical and textual similarities, it is surprising that their works are rarely if ever mentioned in the same critical breath and equally unexpected is the authors' marked distance from one another: no joint interviews, no collaborations and only one or two references appear to each other, and these, almost exclusively in epigraphs. The absence of

¹ Assia Djebar, 'Woman's Memory Spans Centuries', interview by Clarisse Zimra, in *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, trans. Marjolijn de Jager (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1992), 177. This interview has been published only in English.

a public dialogue, either about or between Assia Djébar and Hélène Cixous is mystifying, because their articles, novels, short story collections, plays, films and opera have secured their reputations as international stars in academic/literary/intellectual/biographical circles that undoubtedly overlap.

Questioned as to whether she and Djébar had met, Cixous simply answered, 'Yes': it is only possible to imagine what the authors might or might not have to say to one another.² Such speculation, intriguing as it may be, will not concern us here at any great length. What will be the implicit and explicit, direct and oblique dialogue present between the authors' oeuvres. But, it may be objected, there is nothing unique about two twentieth-century women writers sharing similar thematic preoccupations, such as women, the writing self, the body, colonialism and so on: after all, these themes repeatedly surface in post-1968 French and Francophone literature, in a number of works by other notable women writers, including Marguerite Duras, Marie Cardinal, Maryse Condé, and Lëïla Sebbar. And yet, my claim here is that reading for the dialogue between Cixous's and Djébar's oeuvres exposes more than thematic coincidences: it brings to light the development of a particular narrative and writing position, referred to here as that of the 'border subject', the roots of which stem from the authors' biographies; this thesis uncovers how in the space between Cixous's and Djébar's writing Algeria represents both a tenacious link and an insurmountable divide.

What usually constructs an individual's identity—nationality, language and profession—is, for Cixous and Djébar, a complex set of relationships constantly in flux. It is imperative to underline that the authors' childhoods in French colonial Algeria were very different: one is a Muslim, the other a Jew, one is "Algerian" and the other in Algerian eyes "French" or "European". Djébar was one of only a few thousand Arabic girls who

² Hélène Cixous, conversation with the author, London, England 23 April 2002.

attended French school in North Africa: her access to the French language made possible her entrance to the world literary stage via a slightly racy, best-selling novel (*La Soif* 1957), estranged her from her cloistered Algerian sisters and turned her, for many years, into the *bête noire* of North African critics. Cixous is a Jew of German, Spanish, Polish, and Hungarian ancestry who grew up in a French colonial Algeria during the years of Vichy: as she tells it, the European settlers and the Algerian Jews rejected her family on the grounds of race, while Algerian Jews, in particular the women, eyed her mother's widowhood warily and, as a result, were careful never to invite the Cixous family. Despite the important biographical differences between Cixous and Djébar, similarities do exist and these may well spur the authors' impetuses to distance themselves. Although the authors were educated in French schools, French is neither Cixous's nor Djébar's maternal tongue, but both authors use this language for writing: Cixous claims Arabic, German, English and Spanish as influences and Djébar signals Berber, Arabic and 'women's language' as shaping her written French. Today both authors live abroad: Djébar presently teaches at New York University and Cixous's base is Paris.

The explicit and repeated use Cixous and Djébar make of biographical facts and events in their writing--for example, the death of Cixous's father or the breakdown of Djébar's first marriage--lend importance to considering the role of the autobiographical in the authors' fictional writing without, however, creating a too simplistic account that reduces the text to the woman. As with many of the French 'new autobiographies' or 'auto-fictions' Cixous's and Djébar's writing predicated a lost origin which results in what Raylene L. Ramsay refers to as 'an exile in language as they seek the impossible recovery (remembering) of the past and its meaning through language'.³ Such a process necessarily involves the authors' investigation of both autobiographical and historical incidents

³ Raylene L. Ramsay, *French New Autobiographies: Sarraute, Duras and Robbe-Grillet* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1996), 8.

through the writing of semi-fictional works. The consequences of the writers' recollection of the past are their willingness to signal oppression, to ruthlessly investigate the self and its society and, in particular, to signal a path for women's liberation. Thus, their childhoods in a colony appear to have furnished an education, both at the French schools and in the streets of Algiers, which transformed the authors into guardians--individuals not only prepared to attack injustices but also aware that how they did so was desperately important. Although often unremarked (especially with regard to Cixous), it is difficult to overestimate the importance of French colonial Algeria as a homeland--a place distinct from today's Algeria--for the authors' literary works. The contradictions of their home, a place in which Algerians and European settlers lived closely together, but were sharply separated by disparate economic conditions and privileges, ensure that the authors remain perpetual exiles, supremely conscious of the foreigner within themselves, and therefore, willing to question and provoke through subversive writing.

Writing about their Algerian childhoods enables the creation of a textual ground in which Cixous and Djébar blur, braid and, as a result, upset the sharp racial, social, linguistic and cultural divisions present in French colonial Algeria or in any other hegemonic system, such as patriarchy or tyranny. The critics Gloria Anzaldúa and Françoise Lionnet argue that writing practices similar to Cixous's and Djébar's carve new spaces from which hegemonic systems are absent. Such a place exists, for the time being, in certain individuals and in particular kinds of writing. Lionnet argues, in particular, for a new way of reading a literary text in a manner sympathetic to its influences and that also resists the temptation to reduce or categorize the authorial, textual and narrative complexities: this necessarily involves a contemplation of the historical and cultural context. Behind these writing and reading strategies lies the hope that a new poetics will emerge that contains an escape from the entrapments of binary oppositions. Below I will sketch Anzaldúa's and Lionnet's

thinking as frameworks in order to situate the border subject as it journeys through Cixous's and Djébar's oeuvres in an alternative theoretical landscape.

Anzaldúa grew up along the border between Texas and Mexico: this geographical location informs her description of the combination of violence and injustice as well as the possibilities and joys located in the spaces where two cultures collide. In *Borderlands: La Frontera/The New Mestiza* (1999), she elaborates how a new kind of consciousness, 'the new *mestiza*', can be developed or awakened: the new *mestiza* celebrates and draws strength from different languages and cultures, poetry and prose, switching from different codes, for example in Anzaldúa's instance, Castilian Spanish, Chicano Spanish, English and Nahuatl and drawing on different traditions, including folk ones. This pluralism is precisely what the text enacts, and Anzaldúa herself is an example of the new *mestiza*: 'this book then, speaks of my existence'.⁴ Although she firmly rejects the idea of an overarching American melting pot, angrily pointing out the whites' treatment of the "wetbacks" or the migrant workers, she describes the new *mestiza* as an individual in whom different languages, cultures and religions successfully co-exist and even fuse: 'The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity . . . She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode--nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad, and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned'.⁵

The reluctance to abandon the 'bad' and the 'ugly' from her different cultures is a characteristic of Anzaldúa's new *mestiza* also present in the border subject:

⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, *The Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 2nd ed., (California: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

So yes, though "home" permeates every sinew and cartilage in my body, I too am afraid of going home. Though I'll defend my race and culture when they are attacked by non-mexicanos, *conozco el malestar de mi cultura*. I abhor some of my culture's ways, how it cripples its women, *como burras*, our strengths used against us, lowly *burras* bearing humility with dignity . . . I abhor how my culture makes *macho* caricatures of its men . . . I can understand why the more tinged with Anglo blood, the more adamantly my colored and colorless sisters glorify their culture's values--to offset the extreme devaluation by the white cultures . . . But I will not glorify those aspects of my culture which have injured me in the name of protecting me. (Italics in text)⁶

This passage elaborates the excruciating difficulty for a writer who dares criticize her culture on the world stage. To signal the fault lines in one's traditions, particularly when the specific culture is an undervalued one, becomes tantamount to treachery. For the individual who grows up where cultures, races and languages collide to write involves balancing on a tightrope between to criticize and to betray, to illuminate and to over-expose. In Djébar's writing, one of the central dilemmas is how to write in such a way that will undo the societal and cultural boundaries that restrict women's access to the outside world but that will not, in turn, deliver her Algerian sisters to the erotic myths of the harem in both North African and European imaginations. Sensitive to the ease with which the other can be appropriated in writing, Cixous evokes the contradictions of her homeland through an especially circumspect approach that strives nonetheless to have a concrete impact. The border subject--as present in Cixous's and Djébar's oeuvre--can be described as clairvoyant---a subject gifted with the ability to see the myriad self, *el malestar* of a homeland that has vanished, the devaluation of a people, and a radically different future. Additionally, such clairvoyance leads to an ability to see and therefore avoid the duplication of oppressive gestures inherent in speaking about the other within and without.

⁶ Ibid., 43-44.

What compels the new *mestiza* and border subject to share their visions--as narrators or authors---is their ambiguous origin or homeland, which continues to haunt them in the present. French colonial Algeria, which I describe in Chapter Two, is the shifting, vanishing ground beneath these authors' feet: it was the border where France ended and Africa began, and within this colony meticulous, hierarchical divisions of identity, religion and race were maintained through endless structures of humiliation and violence. Today, although French colonial Algeria no longer exists except in the fact and fiction of memories, the repercussions of colonialism persist in the memories of the French and the Algerians. For many, French colonial Algeria and the events that occurred in the years after liberation are at the root of the troubles that began in earnest with the annulment of the elections in 1992--the results of which would have led, in all likelihood, to the victory of the FIS (Front Islamique du Salut). After the assassination of the popular President Boudiaf in 1994--the responsibility for which remains unclear--individuals with links to Algeria found themselves asking both "why?" and "who?" as the violence escalated, with the number of victims climbing past 100,000 and the killers only rarely apprehended. In this way, Cixous and Djébar have been witnesses to the evolution of their homeland from colony to independence and then to the rapid disintegration of a once promising Algeria into auto-destruction.

The Algerian trajectory is a dramatic one, with specific incidents unique to its development; it does share, however, some characteristics with the 'Borderlands' identified by several Chicano critics and theorists, including Anzaldúa, and used by them to refer to where Mexico and the U.S. meet:

In fact, the Borderlands are physically present whenever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. (*Italics in text*)⁷

The border subject as it appears, develops and ultimately disappears throughout Cixous's and Djébar's fictional and semi-autobiographical narrators is a subject born from a Borderland who refuses to choose one consistent, straightforward identification at the price of excluding others. For one of the complications of the border subject is that her different cultures, countries and languages are often in conflict, and therefore, she is continually asked to choose, to divide her identity into neat categories. The question of language becomes a particularly fraught and emotional one, since to write in one language and not the other becomes not only a personal choice but also a political decision.

Tzvetan Todorov evokes part of the complexities of being in the space between cultures, which must not be overlooked in the consideration of the possibilities. Upon Todorov's return to Sofia after many years of exile in Paris he discovers that his two languages (Bulgarian and French) form two incompatible wholes as do his two cultures: the resulting polyphony 'l'égalité des voix me fait sentir le souffle de la folie'.⁸ He importantly questions whether having two cultures, two languages is necessarily 'un privilège qui vous garantit l'accès à la modernité'.⁹ Unlike Anzaldúa, he draws back from the madness he feels encroaching upon him by advocating a division between his languages and cultures. Todorov underlines thus the significant point that having more than one culture or language can potentially destabilize the self, for the border subject who fuses her multiple conceptions of self and then, at other moments insists on their distinctness can come

⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, 'Bilinguisme, dialogisme et schizophrénie', *Du Bilinguisme* (Paris: Denoël, 1985), 25.

⁹ Ibid., 26.

dangerously close to insanity. Within Cixous's and Djébar's writing, the tension between the possibilities and the vertiginous dislocation inherent in having multiple identities/languages remains unresolved.

Perhaps one of the most useful feminist accounts of the possibilities of reading texts and retaining their multiple identifications is contained in Lionnet's *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (1989), which appropriates the concept of *métissage* for a feminist reading practice. Many metaphors, in lieu of a definition, for *métissage* appear in Lionnet's description, including 'a sheltering site', the 'site of undecidability and indeterminacy', the 'fertile ground of our heterogeneous and heteronomous identities' and 'the only racial ground on which liberations struggles can be fought'.¹⁰ It is noteworthy that the majority of the metaphors used to evoke *métissage* are allusions to a place, a site, and the ground: this appears to be both an attempt to stake out new territory as well as an effort to keep *métissage* from ascending to the transcendental realms of the theoretical structures it hopes to contest. From the opposition inherent in *métissage*--it is posited as an alternative to hegemonic systems--comes one of this essay's central paradoxes: in proposing an alternative to binary oppositions Lionnet appears to depend on a dichotomy in order to make the argument. Moreover, it is certainly problematic that Lionnet draws support for the theorization of *métissage* from canonical male critics, amongst these Karl Marx, Edouard Glissant, Albert Memmi, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Roland Barthes in what might be considered as an attempt to provide authenticity to her theoretical gesture.

Nonetheless, Lionnet's appropriation and transformation of *métissage* signals some of the benefits to be drawn from Anzaldúa's refusal to split the self:

¹⁰ Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 5,6,8, 9.

We can be united against hegemonic power only by refusing to engage that power on its own terms, since to do so would mean becoming ourselves a term within that system of power. We have to articulate new visions of ourselves, new concepts that allow us to think *otherwise*, to bypass the ancient symmetries and dichotomies that have governed the ground and the very possibility of thought, of "clarity" in all of Western philosophy.¹¹

Thus *métissage* signals an alternative space that houses 'new visions': Lionnet elucidates how the critic can escape the pitfalls of hegemonic reading strategies, embrace solidarity and propose new kinds of reading, writing and living practices through the investigation of autobiographical voices that attempt to find new visions of the self. Certainly, Lionnet has a point that by allowing the text to suggest its own framework instead of forcing one upon it, the appropriating gesture of reading becomes interactive. As elaborated in one of her subsequent texts, *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity* (1995), she is specifically interested in how the postcolonial subject becomes adept at braiding the traditions at its disposal and uses fragments to 'participate in a dynamic process of transformation'.¹² Transformation necessarily involves reciprocal relationships in which the text and the reader, the author and her society, "European" and "Algerian" women engage in a dialogue-like process of exchange and interchange that forefronts tensions, differences and confrontations.

Throughout their oeuvres Cixous's and Djébar's writing consistently focuses on a female subject both individual and collective: the guises in which this subject appears in each authors' oeuvre do not benefit from being subsumed; instead, it is their differences that will interest us. It is possible to claim, nonetheless, that their writing does share a focus on a 'je' on the brink of separation, transgression, liberation, coming home, and

¹¹ Italics in text, *Ibid.*, 5-6.

¹² Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 5.

engagement with the political. The details of how the 'je' in Cixous's texts or Djébar's texts cope with the linguistic, cultural and societal edges on which they balance will interest us, at some length, in the chapters that follow, which are internally organized by themes so as to forefront differences and similarities in the authors' approaches. The development of the border subject and why the authors ultimately put it aside as a central textual preoccupation emerges from reading the authors' writing against each other and forms one justification for this project.

At the same time, it is important to note that the historical, autobiographical context and critical reception has shaped the authors' writing: this provides an additional justification for reading the authors writing side-by-side. A particular critical reception, shaped by historical events, resulted in readings that can be characterized as extra-text, i.e. more concerned with exterior events than the actual textual fabric. I have chosen to focus on two important moments: the critical reception of the authors' first two texts covering the time period from 1950-1970 and then the change that occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the authors attracted a dramatic amount of international attention. The French-Algerian War and May 1968, the authors' subsequent political activity or apparent lack of one, are examples of events that shaped the critical reception in the first time period. French critics appropriated Djébar as *une Françoise Sagan algérienne* after the publication of *La Soif* (1957)—in a gesture that assimilated Djébar as "one of them" and simultaneously diminished Djébar's novel by likening her writing to the inferior work of Sagan. North African critics branded her as a *petite bourgeoise*, oblivious to the war and only concerned with frivolous matters whilst her compatriots died battling the French. Like most post-war, twentieth-century French writers, Cixous's texts evolved against the diminishing influence of the *nouveau roman*—her elaboration of the theory and practise of *écriture féminine* distinguished her from the *nouveau roman* but locked her into playing *écriture*

féminine's ambassador and delegate. Historical events and literary movements shaped the early critical texts which played, in turn, a formative role: these set the tone and asked the questions that continue to be addressed both by the authors as well as later critics.

The second period can be said to coincide with significant shift in the critical reception that occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Djébar's seminal *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980) and Cixous's 'Le Rire de la méduse' (1976) attracted significant attention from the Anglo-American Academic community. These books coincided with a particular academic moment—one of the characteristics of which was an interest in "feminist" or "post-colonial" literatures. As a result, the authors became representatives of "French feminism"(Cixous) or "Algerian women's writing" and "feminist post-colonial writers" (Djébar), and this, despite the authors' ambivalence towards such terms. Cixous's and Djébar's works have been read increasingly through, with or against such appellations. Particular kinds of readings ensued that superimposed certain ideologies (democratic, anti-colonial and feminist) onto the texts, which may well be inevitable in literary criticism, but which also had the side effect of steering the path taken by subsequent commentaries. In a striking contrast to studies of Djébar's texts, there have been very few biographical approaches to Cixous's works, and this, despite the ubiquitous presence in her texts of Algeria, or events that occurred there. An examination of the most influential critical articles will show to what extent the Anglo-American university world has assimilated and appropriated Cixous and Djébar—a phenomenon present with other French and Francophone writers (Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Edouard Glissant, Maryse Condé). The critical reception of Cixous's and Djébar's writing alongside the historical context will be investigated in Chapter Two through the investigation of selected criticism.

Many aspects of the verbal fabric of the authors' works remain unexplored, and in particular, those themes that emerge from a truly comparative reading. Existing

comparative studies of Djébar and Cixous with other writers frequently pair their writing with authors that come from the same geographical region: in Djébar's instance with a Francophone woman writer or North African feminist (Mariama Bâ and Fatima Mernissi) and in Cixous's with a "French feminist" (Kristeva and Irigaray).¹³ A comparative reading of two authors who are seldom paired and do not fall into the same "isms" brings out new aspects of each writer's oeuvre as well as a sketch of a textual dialogue between a so-called "first-world" and "third-world" writer. A recent trend in comparative, critical studies concerned with gender is the adoption of a resolutely heterosexual method, i.e. the pairing of male and female authors.¹⁴ One of the implications of reading only women authors together, which the heterosexual reading method counteracts, is the creation of new kinds of "women only" ghettos. A heterosexual reading method tends naturally to bring out gender differences. My argument here hinges precisely on gender, because the authors' textual dialogue is a direct result of their adoption of a women-centred writing position, their roots in French colonial Algeria and their diverging experiences of post-war French and Algerian historical frameworks. This thesis attempts to pry Cixous's and Djébar's writing loose from critical constraints in which they have been imprisoned by revealing disregarded aspects of their texts that become visible only through a comparative reading.

The transformations of the border subject will be investigated, therefore, over the trajectory of the authors' oeuvres. In Chapter Three, I demonstrate how the authors' early novels, *Dedans* (1969) and *Les Impatients* (1958), contain a vital negotiation with and transgression of space—between individuals, the self and the city. The breakthrough texts 'Le Rire de la méduse' (1975) and *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980) gained an

¹³ For comparative studies on Djébar/Bâ, see Mildred Mortimer, *Journeys through the French African Novel* (London: Heinemann, 1990); for Djébar/Mernissi, see Winifred Woodhull, 'Feminism and Islamic Tradition', *Studies in Twentieth Century Literatures* 17, no.1 (Winter 1993), 27-43. Studies comparing Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva are too numerous to list here, but the most influential remains Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1985).

¹⁴ See Julia Waters *Intersexual rivalry: A "Reading in Pairs" of Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000); see also Alex Hughes, *Heterographies* (Oxford: Berg, 1999).

international public for the authors and, in tune with the intellectual and literary mood of Paris in the late 1970s, women's body and how to write about it appears as a central concern. Chapter Four re-visits these famous works to elucidate how the authors adopt the border subject as a writing position and wield it to craft viable liberating strategies. One of the unforeseen consequences of their liberating strategies was Cixous's and Djébar's turn to the explicitly semi-autobiographical: as a result, incidents from the authors' own lives became the material for an investigation of their fictive homelands in Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985) and Cixous's *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage* (2000): these two texts will be the focus of Chapter Five. And lastly, in Chapter Six, I reveal how in Cixous's *Le Jour où je n'étais pa là* (2000) and Djébar's *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* (1995), the authors move beyond their obsession with the border subject to zero in on present traumas, the tangled roots of which are in history and, as a consequence of these excavations, their writing begins to bear witness to a conflicted present in a manner that hints at a tentative construction of solidarity amongst Algerian born writers.

Cixous and Djébar are prolific writers who continue to publish new books every year. Inevitably, I have excluded whole genres and many works from this study: for example, Cixous's theatrical works, which are recently attracting increased and well-deserved critical interest, as well as Djébar's films, play and recent opera. Djébar's war novels, her volume of poetry, and Cixous's literary criticisms have also been omitted. The idea was not to do an exhaustive investigation of the authors' oeuvre--a project well outside the scope of a thesis concentrating on two authors. Instead, the plan was to show a range of texts, selected as key representations of thematic intersections in the authors' projects, which simultaneously evoke the scope and importance of Cixous's and Djébar's oeuvre.

During one of Djébar's many *allers-retours* between Paris and Algiers,--'I would go back and forth between Paris and Algiers, thinking all the time about the possibility of a dialogue

between a European woman and an Algerian one, its modalities'--she wondered about a dialogue between a Western woman and her Southern sister and, more specifically, about the all-important forms this might assume.¹⁵ In this study, it is precisely the modalities of the border subject that will hold our interest; these come to light by putting Cixous's and Djébar's writing into a dialogue that brings out differences. Such a textual dialogue is in all likelihood *not* what Djébar had in mind during her flights over the Mediterranean: this is borne out by the public distance between herself and Cixous. And yet, reading her work against Cixous's simultaneously enlarges both the critical optic and the scope of each individual writer's oeuvre: for a comparative reading ultimately reveals the tentative construction of a new poetics that may enable solidarity amongst Algerian born writers. Cixous's and Djébar's written journeys from containment to liberation, and finally, to the process of bearing witness to the events of the twentieth-century clearly speaks to us as a warning of new historical traumas.

¹⁵ Djébar, 'Woman's Memory', 177.

Literary Border Subjects

Overview of Historical Contexts and Critical Commentaries

During the 1950s and 1960s, whilst France and Algeria engaged in a deadly struggle, two Algerian born authors—Hélène Cixous and Assia Djebar—burst onto the Parisian literary scene. The authors left behind Algiers, which at that point had been reverberating with bombs for several years, to attend French universities and then in rapid succession wrote their first articles and books. Given the charged political atmosphere in both Paris and Algiers, it is unsurprising that a vociferous critical reception, by turns infuriated and laudatory, sprang up in the wake of the authors' writing. Critical expectations and exhortations abounded for Cixous's and Djebar's writing, poised as they were and continue to be, between opposing cultures and languages. The delicacy of their approaches, notable in the care they took not to appropriate their subjects, elicited nonetheless a passionate critical reception that impacted upon the authors' political and literary viewpoints. This chapter aims to look at this critical reception against the backdrop of history—personal, national and textual—to investigate the making of Cixous and Djebar as literary border figures whose writing has always balanced on the edges between genres, cultures and languages.

Crucial events such as the French-Algerian War and May 1968 overshadowed and influenced the early critical reception of the authors' works, in particular those published from 1957 to the late 1960s. A decade later, critical commentaries established Cixous's and Djébar's literary reputation in the 1970s and 1980s as significant presences in French and Francophone literatures; however, the literary and intellectual nomenclatures of these post-modernist readings, including "French feminism" and "Francophone women writers", meant that filters appeared through which critics read and wrote about Cixous's and Djébar's lives, political positions and writings. As I shall demonstrate, particular kinds of readings were privileged, initially as a result of historical events and subsequently because of literary trends. In this chapter, the focus is on a selection from the hundreds of articles, reviews and books written about Cixous's and Djébar's oeuvre during the two time periods—1950s-1960s and 1970s-1980s: the criteria used to select the critical material was that it must be representative, influential and/or extraordinary. I also provide a general picture of the historical context and literary movements that played an important role, in particular the incidents that specifically concerned Cixous and Djébar. For like many contemporary writers, Cixous's and Djébar's intellectual trajectories are in a constant dialogue with their critical reception and the events of the times.

War, memory, trauma

After 135 years, French colonisation of Algeria ended with an eight-year war (1954-1962), referred to alternatively as *les événements d'Algérie*, *la révolution algérienne*, *la sale guerre*, *la guerre d'Algérie*, and *la guerre Franco-Algérienne*. In an interview Djébar uses the term 'revolution' to describe the war, and then quickly adds, 'correction, I never use that term; I call it "the

Algerian war":¹ the politics of naming demonstrates how contentious all aspects of the war continue to be for both French and Algerians. Indeed, only in 1999 and by parliamentary vote was *guerre d'Algérie* substituted in official French discourse for *événements d'Algérie*. As Henry Russo points out, if France in 1954 had admitted it was waging war by referring to the conflict as *guerre d'Algérie*, then it would have meant a French defeat, since such a declaration would have implicitly acknowledged the existence of Algeria as an independent nation.² For many of the French, including the majority of the *pieds-noirs* (the European settlers), the war was an internal conflict or a civil one—a war in which the enemy was everywhere and nowhere.³ The ambiguous references to the war, exemplified in the politics of its name, suggest an unresolved malaise on both sides of the Mediterranean.

Historians have reached, nonetheless, a tentative consensus on at least two direct triggers for the war: first, there was the reluctance of the French to give Muslims or Arabs French citizenship—terms such as *Algérien* and *Algérienne* were used until after the war. In *Algérie française*, Muslims were considered to be second-class citizens.⁴ According to the Indigenus Code in effect until 1944, Muslims might be granted French citizenship and its rights and privileges only if they renounced Islam. As a result, only about 2,000 or 3,000 Algerians had obtained French citizenship by 1934;⁵ the rest were considered 'subjects' and not citizens. Jews were granted French citizenship by the Crémieux decree of 1870 and the Europeans, who were of diverse origins but primarily Maltese, Italian and Spanish, shortly afterwards in 1889. The second important factor that contributed directly to the war was

¹ Assia Djebar, 'Woman's Memory Spans Centuries', Interview by Clarisse Zimra, in *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1992), 178.

² Henry Russo, 'La Guerre d'Algérie et la culture de la mémoire', *Le Monde* (5 April 2002).

³ On the origin of the term *pieds-noirs* see Lucienne Martini, *Racines de papier: essai sur l'expression littéraire de l'identité pieds-noirs* (Paris: Publisud, 1997), 274-275.

⁴ See Alistair Horne's classic *A Savage War of Peace, 1954-1962* (New York: Viking Press, 1978); see also John Ruedy's *Modern Algeria: the Origins and Development of a Nation* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992). *Algérie française* was the term used to describe French colonial Algeria. While trying to resolve the conflict and sway French public opinion towards accepting an independent Algeria, De Gaulle would say *Algérie algérienne*. When referring to the *pieds-noirs* image of Algeria, he would say *l'Algérie de papa*.

⁵ See Dorothy Pickles, *Algeria and France: from Colonialism to Cooperation* (London: Methuen & Co, 1963); Jacqueline Kaye and Abdelhamid Zoubir, *Ambiguous Compromise: Language, Literature and National Identity in Algeria and Morocco* (London: Routledge, 1990).

insufficient economic reforms—the entire Algerian economy was shaped to suit colonial needs. Attempts to better the economic situation of the colonised was passed as law in Paris but never applied in Algiers.

Simone de Beauvoir points out in her memoirs that 'il s'agissait d'un conflit entre deux communautés civiles'—the *pieds-noirs* and the Algerians with the French army uncomfortably trapped in the middle.⁶ Metropolitan French children had been taught in schools and colleges that Algeria was an overseas extension of France, as had students in French colonial schools in Algeria. When the first troubles began, the French public received little news, for example, about Sétif in 1945, where 103 Europeans were killed. In retaliation somewhere between 1,020 (French colonial figure) and 45,000 (Algerian figure) Muslims were killed. A young Kateb Yacine, later to become the "founding father" of Francophone Algerian literature, was one witness to this event: his breakthrough work, *Nedjma*, is widely read as a parable for the Algerian nation's struggle to free itself.⁷ The French left, in particular the communist party, were disappointingly slow to support the Algerian nationalists, but in 1961, only one year before Independence, the so-called *Manifesto of the 121* protesting against the war in Algeria and urging French soldiers to desert was signed by such influential figures as Beauvoir, Marguerite Duras, Jean-Paul Sartre, Françoise Sagan, Nathalie Saurraute and Maurice Blanchon, amongst others. As the war progressed, the number of adversaries multiplied, because a fraction of the *pieds-noirs* took matters into their hands and formed their own army, the OAS (Organisation Armée Secrète). It carried out assassinations in Algeria and France aimed at destabilising the peace negotiations at Evian.

It is important to note that of all France's colonies Algeria endured the longest and costliest struggle to obtain independence, and the Algerian government's official estimate is

⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force des choses II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 90.

⁷ Kateb Yacine, *Nedjma: Roman* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1956).

a 'million and a half martyrs'.⁸ To this also must be added the many people, both Algerians and *pieds-noirs*, displaced from their homes, as well as the wounds left on the psyches and bodies of torture victims. Perhaps because of the magnitude of the trauma, in France the Algerian war was still widely perceived as a 'dusty archaism' as recently as the 1970s or 1980s.⁹ And yet, as Russo argues, a process of recollecting events akin to that undertaken in relation to the Holocaust but fraught with different complexities, appears to have begun. One notable example is the Francophone psychologist Louissette Ighilahriz's recent account of her torture during the war: it provoked an uproar in France because of its tone—she broke her silence in the hope of finding the French doctor who saved her—, and for her willingness to name the officers present, including Jacques Massu.¹⁰ The response from General Paul Aussaresses was unrepentant, and to the outrage of many—'Jacques Chirac, s'est dit "horriifié"'—he defended the use of torture.¹¹

At the same time, civil cases concerning events during the war are being brought to French courts, often by Algerians, and numerous testimonial accounts, both by former combatants and victims, are being published in France. Other evidence of the emergence of a remembrance process includes the erection of a Parisian monument in 1996 honouring the war dead, a plaque placed in 2001 on the Quai de la Seine to remember the dead of 17 October 1961, and the beginning of an official acknowledgement of the *barkis's* fate.¹² As Russo argues, the 'devoir de mémoire' has begun to infuse all (French) reflection upon the French-Algerian war: this has resulted in tensions perhaps even greater than those present in public discourse on the Shoah or Vichy, given that only a tiny minority defend the Nazis or collaborators, while in the context of the French-Algerian war multiple adversaries

⁸ For details on the 'grisly debate' over the number of casualties, see Ruedy, *Modern Algeria*, 190.

⁹ Kristen Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonisation and the Re-ordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995), 9.

¹⁰ Louissette Ighilahriz, *Algérienne*, with Anne Nivat (Paris: Fayard/Calmann-Lévy, 2001).

¹¹ Editorial, 'Comment juger nos crimes en Algérie?', *Le Monde* (6 May 2001). See also Paul Aussaresses, *Services spéciaux, Algérie 1955-1957* (Paris: Perrin, 2001).

¹² The *barkis* were Algerians who fought on the side of the French.

continue to stand by their views.¹³ And yet, the proliferation of official monuments and gestures indicate that France may well be coming to terms with this *page sanglante* of history; the advent of 2003 as *l'année de l'Algérie* will likely push forward the process of remembering and perhaps resolving past traumas.

A crucial issue, which also partly explains the continuing tensions between Algeria and France, is the *pieds-noirs* factor, for uncertain of their future in a newly independent Algeria and fearful of reprisals, over 1,380,000 *pieds-noirs* left Algeria for France at the end of the French-Algerian war in 1962:¹⁴ many felt that their choice was between *la valise et le cercueil*. France and the French grudgingly accommodated the *rapatriés*; many of whom had never before been to France and, in many instances, could trace their roots five generations back in Algeria. As Beauvoir comments, 'Quand les pieds-noirs se ruèrent sur la France, . . . on vit naître . . . un nouveau racisme entre gens de la même race'.¹⁵ One of the results of their departure and the subsequent difficulties that faced the *pieds-noirs* in France, many of whom lost all of their belongings and wealth in Algeria, has been the proliferation of a nostalgic fictional literature: today it is estimated that approximately 6 million people in France, amongst these many *pieds-noirs*, have close ties to Algeria.

Cixous's mother and brother were alongside the 30,000 or so European settlers who remained in Algeria after Independence. Cixous's brother actively supported the nationalists. The Cixous family, although apparently *pieds-noirs*, formed part of the approximately 130,000 strong Jewish population of French Algeria: these Jews occupied a highly ambiguous identity category in French Algeria, akin to a border zone between the opposed French and Algerians. The Muslims did not consider the Jews to be Algerians, and the French did not consider the Jews (unlike the Italians, Maltese, and Spanish

¹³ Russo, 'La Guerre'.

¹⁴ To visualise the scale of this exodus it is helpful to imagine Copenhagen, the largest city in Scandinavia, emptied of the majority of its population.

¹⁵ Beauvoir, *La Force*, 462.

population) to form part of the European community. Michel Abitbol claims that 'anti-Semitism was the only mass ideology common to all Algerian Europeans'.¹⁶ Indeed in 1940, the Vichy regime took French citizenship away from the Algerian Jews, and immediately the local government forbade teachers, lawyers and doctors to work—including Cixous's father, a doctor, who was forced to turn to work as a podiatrist to sustain his family. French colonial schools were allowed to have only a small percentage (1-2%) of Jewish students: this resulted in the creation of a university staffed by newly unemployed Jewish professors as well as the formation of ad-hoc elementary and high schools.¹⁷ Cixous consistently distances her writing from *pieds-noirs* literature, in contrast to other Jewish-Algerian born writers who are often included in *pieds-noirs* anthologies: this is possibly because of her oft-related, formative encounters with *pieds-noirs*'s Anti-Semitism in French Algeria, which she refers to as part of a 'Jewish-Algerian context of humiliation'.¹⁸

In 1943 French citizenship was restored to the Jews. Jacques Derrida, also an Algerian born Jew who has been close to Cixous for over thirty years, relates how losing one's nationality and receiving none other to replace it, results in a peculiar kind of identity trouble. Derrida questions what an individual like him—born in Algeria, Jewish, French-speaking and writing and who lost French citizenship for three years—can claim as identification.¹⁹ On the one hand, to say he is *franco-maghrébin* suggests that there was once a French-North African unity, which is of course contestable; on the other hand, as Cixous points out 'J'avais la nationalité française quand je suis née. Mais jamais personne ne s'est pris pour français dans ma famille'.²⁰ The contradictions between language, nationality and

¹⁶ Michel Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa during the Second World War*, translated by Catherine Tihany Zentelis (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne University Press, 1989), 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 68-73.

¹⁸ Hélène Cixous, (untitled paper presented at National Jewish Book Week, London, England 23 April 2002).

¹⁹ See Jacques Derrida, *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre, ou la prothèse d'origine* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1996).

²⁰ Hélène Cixous, 'Albums et Légendes', *Hélène Cixous, Photos de racines*, with Mireille Calle-Gruber, (Paris: *des femmes*, 1994), 206.

actual French-ness resulted in Cixous assuming a border subject position. In Algeria she was always an "outsider-inside":

Comment aurais-je pu être d'une France qui colonisait le pays algérien alors que je savais que nous-mêmes juifs allemands tchécoslovaques hongrois étions d'autres arabes. Je n'avais rien à faire dans ce pays. Mais je ne savais pas non plus où j'avais à faire. C'est la langue française qui m'a conduite à Paris.²¹

French was Cixous's father's language, but her first language was German, the language of her German born mother; she grew up hearing Arabic, Spanish and Berber in Algeria: 'I've never been able to answer the question what is your maternal tongue'.²²

Without the intervention of *la patrie* (France), for which the French language formed an inherent component of the *mission civilatrice*, neither Cixous nor Djébar would have made their way to Paris. From as early as 1783, the French monarchist Antoine Rivarol in *De l'Universalité de la langue française* described 'un empire des lettres qui s'étend sur la variété des peuples, et qui, plus durable et plus fort que l'empire des armes, s'accroît également des fruits de la paix et des ravages de la guerre'.²³ The French practised an imperial policy of linguistic assimilation that led to a particular kind of cultural alienation for the formerly colonised. At the same time, it was a policy of contradictions, for French conquerors in the late 1800s closed the Arabic schools in Algeria, but no French schools replaced these, and as a result, illiteracy skyrocketed to 80%. Clearly then many gaps—the most glaring is the imperialist policy itself—existed between the rhetoric and the practise of the *patrie des droits de l'homme*. And the elite group of Algerians who did have access to French education

²¹ Ibid., 206.

²² Cixous, (untitled paper presented at National Jewish Book Week, London, England 23 April 2002).

²³ Antoine Rivarol, *De l'Universalité de la langue française* (Paris : H. Didier, 1930), 1.

would be inspired by French egalitarianism during their Sorbonne educations and later become political leaders during the fight for Independence.

Djebar was among only a thousand or so young girls in North Africa who received a French education before Independence as a result of the fact that her father taught indigenous students at the French colonial school. Both Cixous and Djebar came to write in French, because of their father's intercession. One of the first characters Djebar created, Hassein from *La Soif*, scathingly sums up the position in which mixed race, or a French education placed an Algerian woman: 'A cette frontière amibiguë entre deux civilisations, vous ne savez que faire, en pauvre petit produit de fabrication mixte que vous êtes! Vous piétinez, et vous n'avez pas le courage d'en sortir. Et d'ailleurs, en sortir pour aller où? Pour aller où?'²⁴ Djebar famously refers to French as *ma langue marâtre*, and through this pejorative usage, refers to her ambivalent relationship with writing in the coloniser's language and the ensuing alienation, for the French language distanced Djebar from other Algerian women, because it enabled her to travel, write and participate on the world stage.²⁵

After *hypokhâgne* at the Lycée Bugeaud and simultaneous with the beginning of the war in Algeria, Djebar left for France in 1954 and became the first student from the colonies to be accepted on full scholarship at *L'Ecole Normale Supérieure de Sévres*. She did not take her *licence* out of solidarity with an Algerian student strike and instead wrote her first novel, *La Soif* (1957), in order to keep busy whilst her classmates studied for their exams. The *directrice* refused to allow Djebar to re-sit her exams, despite the rumoured interference of General De Gaulle's pleas on her behalf—an appeal inspired by Djebar's literary promise. At the same time, the French police wanted Djebar's fiancé for questioning, and her brother was in jail for nationalistic activities. Djebar has claimed, principally in interviews, that the war was so much a part of her day to day life that it seemed indecent for her to

²⁴ Djebar, *La Soif* (Paris: Julliard), 31.

²⁵ Assia Djebar is a pseudonym; her real name is Fatima-Zohra Imalhayène.

write about it: as the vitriolic critical reception to her early books shows, her strategy nearly backfired.

Soufflés and extra-terrestrials

To understand the critical reaction to Djébar's first two novels, *La Soif* and *Les Impatients*, it helps to view them against the background of the war as well as the Algerian literary scene. The Battle of Algiers, which took place through the winter and spring of 1957—the year *La Soif* was published—captured international attention for the revolutionaries but had devastating effects on their groups and organisations.²⁶ Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), a prize-winning movie that was censored in France at the time of its release, shows the involvement of the Algerian population during the battle: Muslim women—amongst these was Zohra Drif—cut then dye their hair blonde, dress in Western clothing, pass through checkpoints and place bombs in a discotheque, an Air France travel agency and the fashionable Milk Bar: it ends with a powerful mass demonstration, incited by an Algerian woman, in favour of independence. Despite the film's optimism, the reality was that in the late 1950s the French were gaining ground in Algeria, and the revolutionaries needed more than ever to appeal to a national feeling. Adam Shatz points out that the idea behind the terror aimed at the *pièdes-noirs* civilians was to provoke exaggerated French reprisals, which it did, and therefore, strengthen the weak support for the FLN (Front de Libération National) amongst Algerians.²⁷

Réna Bensmaïa argues that on the eve of independence, there was a need to create a collective subject akin to a national entity, drawing from whatever was left of a country and people that had survived and escaped total cultural annihilation.²⁸ Part of the FLN's

²⁶ Ruedy, *Modern Algeria*, 168-9.

²⁷ Adam Shatz, 'The Torture of Algiers', *The New York Review of Books*, XLIX, no. 18 (November 21, 2002), 55-56.

²⁸ Réna Bensmaïa, 'Nations of Writers', *Studies in Twentieth-Century Comparative Literature* 23, no. 1 (winter 1999), 164.

strategy, in the war years, involved the militarization of politics, the use of Islam as a rallying cry and the glorification of *jihad*,²⁹ both during and after the war, the arts (and intellectuals) also had to toe the party line. The new literature written by Algerians seemed useful in crafting a national identity in accordance with the FLN's vision, principally because it was published in French and in Paris, and thus it became politically important at a time when there were few Algerian intellectuals visible on the world stage. As a result, this new literature was annexed by at least three different political positions. First, there were the revolutionaries who demanded a literature that represented the independence struggle; second, most modish left-wing Parisian publishers acquired a token Arab writer to symbolize their opposition to the war; and third, right-wing French critics were pleased with colonial subjects who exemplified the increasingly illusory *empire des lettres*.

What will principally concern us here is how North African critics linked the identity of a new nation, Algeria, to that of fictional literature written in the coloniser's language (French) by the soon to be ex-colonised—writers who then came under an obligation to *represent* their country. According to the revolutionary brothers, to edify a national identity through writing involved *témoignage*—an approach favoured by the revolutionaries in the 1950s and 1960s. According to *témoignage*, writers were supposed to reflect an Algerian reality.³⁰ Mostapha Lacheraf, revolutionary, advocate of *Arabisation* and former Minister of Culture in Algeria, described *témoignage* as an attempt to write the reality of the Algerian people, and in specific, the peoples' resistance to colonial oppression. Lacheraf praises Kateb Yacine, Mouloud Feraoun and Moloud Mammeri as writers who instinctively or through experience truly understood the Algerian people as opposed to other writers that were only capable of a conformist, bourgeois understanding.³¹ Lacheraf's prescriptions

²⁹ Shatz, 'The Torture', 56.

³⁰ Abdelkcbir Khatibi, *Le Roman maghrébin: essai* (Paris: Maspero, 1968), 11.

³¹ See Mostapha Lacheraf, 'L'Avenir de la culture algérienne', Interview with M.M. Brumagne in *Les Temps Modernes*, no. 209 (October 1963), 720-745.

collided with Djébar's *La Soif*, a racy story of a young girl's coming of age complete with blondes, beaches, fast cars and an abortion.

Not only did *La Soif* clash with revolutionaries' ideas but it was also written by a young woman, and to compound matters, it reversed the viewpoint of the novel considered to be the cornerstone of this new Algerian literature as well as a *nouveau roman*: *Nedjma* by Yacine. *Nedjma* relates the story of how three men love, lose and search for the elusive Nedjma—a symbol for the Algerian nation. Only once are Nedjma's own feelings mentioned—and this by a male character in the third person. Published only one year afterwards, *La Soif* hardly mentioned the war, and its portrayal of a female character exploring her sexuality was a radical departure from *Nedjma*. Boldly written in the first person, *La Soif* focused on the half-French and half-Algerian main character's coming of age and contained a kissing scene on a sun-drenched beach. The book met with immediate success in France and was translated into English. Djébar's North African compatriots were outraged. As Djébar puts it 'entre 1960 et 1970 certain critiques algériens ont joué les Jdanov à mon égard'.³²

From *La Soif*'s failure to dwell on the war, North African critics (or ones based there) quickly concluded that Djébar knew nothing about the Algerian situation and was a silly bourgeois. Toril Moi describes how Simone de Beauvoir, in a different context but in the same time period (1950s), received a negative critical reception: Moi describes a critical strategy—intended to discredit Beauvoir—of reducing 'the book to the woman' and of questioning Beauvoir's right to speak or write.³³ The critical attacks on Djébar follow a similar schema. First, she is equated with the narrator of *La Soif*; second, she is accused of knowing nothing about Algeria; and third, because of these two points it is claimed she has

³² Assia Djébar, 'Un entretien avec Assia Djébar', Interview with Thoria Smati, *Algérie Actualité* (29 Mars 1990--4 April 1990), 12. Andreï Aleksandrovitch Jdanov (1896-1948), a Soviet politician, was a member of the Communist Party's Central Committee. In 1934, Jdanov established the norms for Soviet Realism at the first USSR Writer's Congress. Responsible for propaganda from 1938 onwards, he directed Soviet cultural politics.

³³ Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: the Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford: Blackwell's, 1994), 75.

no right to speak about Algeria. The issue with Djébar's writing is her authenticity, and the perceived need, at the dawn of independence, for writers to represent the Algerian nation.

An example of this critical strategy is the case made by Lacheraf against Djébar in an interview with the influential *Les Temps modernes* edited by Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre:

Allons, il faut démystifier : Malek Haddad, Assia Djébar sont des écrivains qui n'ont jamais saisi nos problèmes, mêmes les plus généraux. Ils ont tout ignoré, sinon de leur classe petite bourgeoise, au moins de tout ce qui avait trait à la société algériennes; de tous les écrivains algériens, ce sont ceux qui connaissent le moins bien leur pays, ce qui les pousse à escamoter les réalités algériennes sous une "croûte" poétique, elle-même sans originalité du point de vue du roman; "ribaude" chez l'un, bourgeoise chez l'autre. Ces écrivains n'ayant comme public et comme juges que des critiques français, qui eux-mêmes ignoraient tout sur l'Algérie, ont été artificiellement portés sur le pavois. C'est le drame, je le répète, d'un pays où les écrivains produisent une littérature qu'on ne peut juger.³⁴

Lacheraf's critique of Djébar's text can be characterised as extra-text, in other words, as motivated by events occurring on the political plane, rather than the actual verbal fabric of the novel. His critique raises the issue of Djébar's "authenticity" and contains a prescriptive approach that dictates specific concerns and approaches for Algerian literature in French, which Djébar's writing clearly did not satisfy. This exemplifies what Belinda Jack considers as 'the prescriptive role' secondary discourses can play by steering 'the literature towards particular ends, demanding of its authors particular languages, forms or attitudes'.³⁵ To be sure, Algeria inherited a catastrophic situation at Independence—one in which the identification of an "authentic national culture" became tied to questions of

³⁴ Lacheraf, 'L'Avenir', 734.

³⁵ Belinda Jack, *Négritude and Literary Criticism* (Connecticut: Greenwood, 1996), 5.

language.³⁶ Djébar's first novel, written in French and lacking the intermingling of languages that came to characterise her later writing, could only appear "frivolous" from Lacheraf's viewpoint: this is echoed in A. Nadir's call for Djébar to write 'un véritable livre'.³⁷ After the publication of *Les Impatients* one year afterwards— a novel explicitly set before the war, the plot of which is a love triangle—Djébar's reputation was sealed.

And yet, as Abdelkebir Khatibi argues, critics such as Lacheraf seem to have deliberately missed the potential subversion present in *La Soif*:

Des révolutionnaires algériens ont trouvé indécent le fait que Djébar ne se préoccupe dans ce livre que du problème sexuel alors que l'Algérie était en proie à une guerre effroyable. A-t-on vraiment compris que la découverte du corps pour le personnage de *La Soif* est une révolution importante?³⁸

The revolutionaries' reluctance to understand the import of a woman writing about a woman exploring her sexuality—a kind of writing made possible precisely by the freedom gained through Algerian women's participation in the war—foreshadowed how women fighters would be 'forgotten' after the war. The question of why *La Soif* and *Les Impatients* stirred up such vehement feelings amongst her North African contemporaries appears to have much to do with her being a woman writer, as Djébar herself appears to believe: '*My university colleagues never mentioned my novels or would say, semi-dismissively (sic), that their wives read them. It took me awhile to realise that these were gut reactions against anything coming from a woman*' (Italics in text).³⁹

The international critical response, especially the French one, further angered scandalised North African critics. French critics praised *La Soif* and compared Djébar to

³⁶ See Bensmaïa, 'Nations of Writers', 164-177.

³⁷ A. Nadir, 'Les Impatients', Review of *Les Impatients*, by Assia Djébar, *Présence Africaine* (Oct-Nov 1958), 120.

³⁸ Khatibi, *Le Roman maghrébin*, 62.

³⁹ Djébar, 'Woman's Memory', 180.

the Parisian literary darling of the day, Françoise Sagan. The *New York Times* echoed the comparison to 'a Sagan soufflé'.⁴⁰ It did not help that Djébar was like Sagan very young (only just 20), and that they shared the same publisher, Julliard. Fanny Landi-Bénos, who presented *La Soif* and *Les Impatients* as a montage on *Radio Algérie*, was a solitary critical voice who noted that Djébar's art 'laisse loin derrière lui' Françoise Sagan's.⁴¹ The favourable critical response by French critics and public has left two lasting traces: first, critics writing on Djébar's works seem to feel compelled to affirm the value of her writing, i.e. she is *not* an Algerian Françoise Sagan; and second, French praise irritated the North African critics. The latter predictably gave *La Soif* reviews that were the categorical opposite of the French ones: it was memorably remarked that the characters of *La Soif* resembled extra-terrestrials.⁴²

The effect of this critical reaction was immediate: in interviews from the 1950s and 1960s with the Tunis based journal *L'Action*, Djébar disowned *La Soif* as an 'exercice du style' and added 'qu'elle n'avait pas pris ce roman au sérieux'.⁴³ By then Djébar was living in Tunis with her new husband and writing hard-hitting articles for *El Moudjabid*, the political organ of the FLN, which was then under the direction of Frantz Fanon. When she moved to Tunis near the refugee community on the Algerian border and collected women's stories into her next two books, it was suggested that these (*Les Alouettes naïves*, *Les Enfants du nouveau monde*) were designed to smooth the revolutionaries' ruffled feathers. In more recent years, Djébar forcefully defends her first texts: '*My early novels are well-constructed, taut stories. I have said many times that they were written as parenthesis in my real life. Because of this, some think I should cross out the first three and claim that my true career started with Alouettes. I don't* (Italics in text).⁴⁴ And yet, the critical tendency to dismiss her first novels persists as one

⁴⁰ Jean Campbell Jones, Review of *The Mischief*, by Assia Djébar, *New York Times* (12 October 1958).

⁴¹ Fanny Landi-Bénos, 'Assia Djébar: Peintre de la jeunesse d'Algérie', *Ici-Alger*, no.70 (November 1958), 1.

⁴² Nadir, 'Les Impatients', 120.

⁴³ Djébar, 'Anna Martin présente Assia Djébar', interview by Anna Martin, *L'Action* (8 September 1958), 6.

⁴⁴ Djébar 'Woman's Memory', 178.

critic writes in 1990: 'La production ultérieure de l'écrivain et son évolution vers une écriture ciselée nous convient à nous détourner de cette œuvre de jeunesse pour nous intéresser à des œuvres plus récentes'; another more recent example from 2001 suggests 'they are best read as juvenilia—*La Soif*, *Les Impatients*, and *Les Enfants du nouveau monde*'.⁴⁵ As we shall see in the following chapter, with regards to *Les Impatients*, it is possible to take exception to this amputation of Djébar's oeuvre, for her early books merit more attention to their structure and style than they have hitherto received.⁴⁶

Part of the explanation then for the critical reception to Djébar's early novels is that by writing in French, she achieved presence on the world stage, and as a result, she came to bear 'a special burden'; for Algerian writers, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, were expected to be their nations' representatives.⁴⁷ In this way, the writer became an individual who could cross boundaries and help to convince the world. At the same time, writers like Djébar or Malek Haddad were at the forefront of a new literature, which can be described, even today, as an unstable one. Similar to the situation of much literature written by the formerly colonised, Algerian Literature of French expression continues to be what Jack considers 'a literature constantly in search of its own coherence, of its own identity'.⁴⁸ The status of Algerian literature of French expression remains a contentious one: for example, when questioned in 2002 about her thoughts on Djébar's oeuvre, Cixous described what Djébar was trying to do as 'very particular' and distanced their projects on the grounds that Djébar was at the forefront of founding a new Algerian literature.⁴⁹ After more than a half-century of Algerians writing and publishing books in French, it is questionable whether such a literature will ever be anything but unstable and unfounded. Djébar's initial novels clearly did not meet expectations, and moreover, since she raised gender issues which the

⁴⁵ Christine Achour, *Anthologie de la littérature algérienne de langue française* (Paris: Bordas, 1990), 3; Nadia Elia, *Trances, Dances and Vociferations: Agency and Resistance in African Women's Writing* (New York: Garland, 2001), 17.

⁴⁶ See Chapter Three.

⁴⁷ Kaye and Zoubir, *Ambiguous Compromise*, 1.

⁴⁸ Jack, *Négritude*, 1.

⁴⁹ Hélène Cixous, conversation with author, London, England 23 April 2002.

revolutionaries preferred to overlook, North African critics condemned her: to be sure, this accounts in part for her ten year silence after the publications of *Les Alouettes naïves*: 'C'est en passant par le cinéma et en ayant publié ces deux romans polyphoniques que j'ai repris force dans ma vocation d'écrivain'.⁵⁰ The impact of the critical reception of Djébar's early novels—a reception greatly affected by the struggle for Independence—came precariously close to silencing one of its foremost literary voices.

May 1968: a revolution

Cixous attended the Lycée Bugeaud—a *hypokhâgne* that prepared students for the entrance exams to the prestigious Ecoles—the year after Djébar left the same establishment to attend university in Paris. Over the next ten years, while Djébar was publishing her first two novels, Cixous married, obtained the *capés d'anglais*, had three children and completed her doctoral thesis on James Joyce with *félicitations du jury*.⁵¹ It was, therefore, ten years after Djébar's debut as a novelist that Cixous published her collection of short stories, *Le Prénom de dieu* (1967) and obtained her first university post, a *chaire de littérature anglaise*. Overt or explicit references to the French-Algerian War rarely appear in either her first texts or the critical response to these; however, thereafter mentions of her Algerian childhood become a textual touchstone. It is important to note that Cixous's family remained in Algeria during the war, and as we will see at greater length in Chapter Three, her second book can be read as an indirect parable for the Algerian nation. And yet, May 1968 also emerges as a particularly formative event in the making of Cixous as a "French" intellectual figure, for Cixous participated 'de très près à tous les événements de Nanterre et de la Sorbonne', and

⁵⁰ Djébar, 'Un entretien avec Assia Djébar', 12.

⁵¹ For a discussion of Cixous's monumental doctoral thesis, see Morag Shiach, *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing* (London: Routledge, 1991), 40-46.

the next year published *Dedans* (1969), which won the prestigious *Prix Médicis* intended to reward young writers of exceptional promise.⁵²

Historians widely consider May 1968 as one of the most important events in twentieth-century France. Like the war in Algeria, May 1968 pitted two civilisations against one another: the radical student groups who demanded change and a Gaullist government content with the status quo, which was backed by bourgeois French society. Just six years after the end of the French-Algerian war, *les événements* was a phrase once again on French lips, but this time to describe the barricades, demonstrations and police brutality that swept through Paris. Characterised by its spontaneity and immediacy, May 1968 was initially an expression of students' discontent with an autocratic, rigid university system; however, when the strikes and sit-ins unexpectedly brought France's economic activity to a standstill, it became a movement with revolutionary intent.⁵³ Indeed, the many references to the French-Algerian War in the events and politics of May 1968 suggest that it was at least partly inspired by or a response to the war. Chanting slogans, such as the one coined by Marguerite Duras 'Il est interdit d'interdire', students occupied the Sorbonne alongside leftist intellectuals (Sartre and Beauvoir amongst others), authors, anarchists and communists—all invigorated by the possibilities of change.

Simultaneous with the upheavals of May 1968, the Parisian literary milieu evolved significantly in the heady 1960s: Jacques Lacan published his *Écrits* in 1966, Roland Barthes held his seminar—in which Julia Kristeva newly arrived from Sofia gave a memorable presentation on Michel Bakhtin—, and Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie* appeared in 1967. What emerged most clearly in the intellectual milieu was a questioning of the intellectual's role.⁵⁴ A concrete result of this inquiry was the establishment of a new

⁵²Mireille Calle-Gruber, 'Générique', in 'Albums et Légendes', with Hélène Cixous, in *Hélène Cixous, Photos de Racines* (Paris: des femmes, 1994), 210.

⁵³Margaret Atack, *May 68 in French Fiction and Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.

⁵⁴For a discussion of the intellectual's role, see Patrick Combes *La Littérature et le mouvement de mai 68* (Paris: Seghers, 1984).

university, Paris VIII-Vincennes, where amongst other innovations student-teacher hierarchies were abolished: Foucault and Lacan were just two of the major figures teaching at Paris VIII. By her own account, Cixous was instrumental in the founding of this new university, and she continues to teach there today; it is, however, questionable whether Vincennes remains at the cutting-edge of Parisian intellectual life. The precarious situation of Cixous's seminar, the *Centre de Recherche en Etudes Féminines*, bears witness to Paris VIII's diminished importance and centrality to French intellectual life; in fact, the doctoral degree awarded by Cixous's seminar was suspended in 1980, re-instated in 1981 and threatened once again in 1996 with closure.

In the 1950s and 1960s, in part as a reaction against Sartre's 1948 *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, the most significant and innovative literary movement in Paris was the *nouveau roman*.⁵⁵ its aim was to develop a kind of writing capable of 'reproducing and conveying changing perceptions of the world' that ultimately led to the act of writing becoming the subject of the text.⁵⁶ Although a list of early *nouveaux romans* usually includes Yacine's *Nedjma*, Djébar's first novels, with relatively straightforward, linear narratives and plots cannot be considered *nouveaux romans*; however, her post-1980 oeuvre with its elaboration of a uniquely polyphonic, historical and autobiographical writing style bears traces of the *nouveaux romanciers'* textual experiments. Given Cixous's pre-eminence in the Parisian intellectual milieu of the time one expects her first novels to be strongly influenced by the *nouveaux romans*, and her writing does contain many of the characteristics typical of the *nouveau roman*, including formal experimentation, disappearance of stable characters and an elusive narrator,⁵⁷ but her work differs in two important aspects. First, in the Cixousian oeuvre the act of writing has come to be inseparable from the act of reading—an evolution

⁵⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).

⁵⁶ Colin Davies and Elizabeth Fallaize, *French Fiction in the Mitterrand Years: Memory, Narrative, Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 10.

⁵⁷ For the characteristics of the *nouveau roman*, see *Ibid.*, 10.

that is perhaps not unique. Second and more importantly, her elaboration and practice of an *écriture féminine* distinguished her writing from the *nouveau roman*, because it dwelt on multiple explorations of the feminine from a woman-centred perspective.⁵⁸

A marked characteristic of Cixous's critical reception is a tendency to read her writing as that of a woman writer, and to employ this as a decisive factor; however, her Jewish-ness or Algerian-ness is rarely taken into account: indeed, almost no mention of her relation to Algeria appears in critical literature pre-1995. If a significant aspect of the North African critical reception of Djébar's early texts is an assessment of her authenticity, then expectations that Cixous represent her Jewish-ness or Algerian-ness in her fictional texts are largely absent in critical discourse. A review of *Dedans* published in *Les Lettres françaises* does make a rare reference to race: 'la narratrice évoque les problèmes de sa race'.⁵⁹ What exactly Cixous's race is, or which problems the reviewer refers to here, is not elaborated upon in this review. One possible answer for the lack of a critical discourse that referred to Cixous's race or origins, in contrast to Djébar's, was that after the *nouveau roman*, with its focus on the relationship between language and reality, it would have been absurd for a reviewer to upbraid Cixous for neglecting to mention May 1968. In part because of historical events and literary movements, Cixous's critical reception focused on *Dedans*'s language and receiving the *Médicis* effectively crowned her literary effort. Despite a writing style that challenges the reader, she became a part of the French literary establishment, in a way that Djébar would never be because of her Algerian-ness. Clearly then, Cixous appears to have been assimilated into the new, progressive French intellectual milieu to the extent that her African/Jewish race and origin were irrelevant (i.e. she was perceived as 'one of us'), leaving her free to focus on gender; or she was just not as noticeable as Djébar, in the

⁵⁸ See Chapter Four.

⁵⁹ Anne Villelaur, 'Le Médicis à Hélène Cixous,' Review of *Dedans*, by Hélène Cixous, *Les Lettres françaises* 1310 (26 November to 2 December 1969), 10.

sense that Cixous was one author amongst hundreds writing in Paris, while Djébar was one of a handful of North African women writers writing during the war.

The upheaval in Parisian intellectual and political life in the 1960s meant that critics were willing to look indulgently upon challenging texts such as *Prénom de dieu* and *Dedans*. Like the *nouveau roman*, *Prénom de dieu*, and to a lesser extent, *Dedans* challenge their readers: 'On sent, dès les premières pages de *Dedans*, un désir de communiquer qui était totalement absent du *Prénom de Dieu*. C'est plutôt encourageant'.⁶⁰ Even so, the text, with its dream sequences and non-linear narrative, neither received the same type of passionate critical response nor became a "hit" like *La Soif*. In light of this, it is noteworthy that Cixous retroactively proclaimed *Dedans* to be an ethico-political treatise on the situation in Algeria, both conscious and unconscious, between the '40s and the '60s: a comment that will be examined in-depth in Chapter Four.⁶¹ On the one hand, the very obliqueness of *Dedans* has meant that critics read this text almost exclusively as a psychological drama; on the other hand, critical expectations—no one expected Cixous to write about Algeria—also play a part in the critical discourse on this text. Despite her claim, as early as *La Jeune née*, that Algeria was formative in her development as a writer, scant critical light has been shed on the autobiographical aspect of Cixous's work.⁶² Part of the reason may have been Anglo-American academia's desire to perceive Cixous as "French", and thus, her African-ness would have been "out-of-place", and its recognition would undoubtedly make her work more difficult to assimilate into existing literary-theoretical practices. If *Dedans* had been read as an ethico-political treatise on the Algerian situation, then Cixous's status as a literary figure might be quite different: for example, her oeuvre might have been grouped with *pièdes-noirs* literature instead of "French feminism".

⁶⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁶¹ Cixous, 'Guardian of Language', interview with Kathleen O'Grady, translated by Eric Prenowitz, *Women's education des femmes* 12, no. 4 (winter 1996-7), 8. Partial excerpts from the original French are available at the following web address: <http://www.english.ucsb.edu/faculty/ayliu/research/grady-cixous-fr.html>.

⁶² See Chapter Six.

As we have seen, the critical reception of Djébar's early texts was shaped by the French-Algerian war, and in turn, impacted upon the making of Djébar as a literary figure. Although some of her books (*Les Alouettes naïves* and *Les Enfants du nouveau monde*) are taught in Algerian high schools, critical suspicion of her intentions persists, and this, principally because she was a woman writer tackling taboo subjects, such as women's sexuality, in the former coloniser's language. Djébar's recent *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* returns to the notion of *témoignage*, infuses it with innovative literary ambition and confidently subverts the revolutionaries' prescriptions. Unlike Djébar's critical reception, the sweeping political changes in the background of Cixous's literary debut—May 1968—did not affect the critical reception of her books in a similar manner: it was simply not expected, given the lingering influence of the *nouveau roman*, that Cixous would write an account of barricades, strikes or the French-Algerian war. Since Cixous's public profile was lower in Paris, at the time, than Djébar's was in the Algerian community, reviewers were content to focus on the content of Cixous's books, leading to perhaps inevitable critical blind spots on the Algerian aspects of her writing that have persisted for almost 40 years. Once Cixous became actively involved with *Psych et Po*, spearheaded by Antoinette Fouque, the pendulum swung in the other direction, and Cixous, as well as her oeuvre, became lightning rods for the French feminist debates.

***Des femmes, Psych et Po* and Hélène Cixous**

May 1968 was decisive for women. Echoing the experience of women involved with the American Civil Rights Movement, Frenchwomen often performed the 'chores' (photocopying, coffee-making etc), and had to struggle to speak, much less be heard, during May 1968: the ensuing frustration led women to realise that the changes they

wanted would not emerge from a male-dominated revolution.⁶³ An experience, although in a different context, that was not completely dissimilar to that of many Algerian women a few years earlier, who were disappointed after independence that women's issues became the new government's last priority and then dismayed when Islamic law was re-instated. In 1970s France the cries of male students—'le pouvoir est au bout du phallus!'—barging into one of the first women-only meetings at Vincennes served to enforce the conclusion that French women had to take matters into their own hands. A group of women did just that when they laid a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Arc de Triomphe dedicated to a person even more unknown than the soldier—his wife.⁶⁴

Despite the exhilaration of meetings, petitions and publications, differing conceptions of the reasons behind women's oppression and what to do about it led to a definitive split in post-1968 French women's movements. The feminist movement in France, generally referred to as MLF (Mouvement de Libération des Femmes),⁶⁵ had been split along class lines from its beginnings in the nineteenth-century. Three identifiable groups emerged after May 1968: *Psychoanalyse et Politique* (commonly referred to as *Pysch et Po*), the splintered *Féministes Révolutionnaires* and the class struggle current. The following incident exemplifies the disagreements within the French women's movement: at a conference in New York, Cixous—already closely associated with *Pysch et Po*—proclaimed that French women did not use the words "feminist" or "lesbian", at which point several French women seated in the audience rose to protest that the opposite was true.⁶⁶

In an account Cixous gives of her collaborations with other women writers, such as Annie Leclerc, Catherine Clément, Madeleine Gagnon, she makes reference to the tension present in France between women writers, activists and intellectuals:

⁶³ This section draws from Claire Duchén's excellent *Feminism in France: From May '68 to Mitterrand* (London: Routledge, 1986).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 8-10.

⁶⁵ *des femmes*, led by Fouque, registered MLF as their trademark to the outrage of other feminist groups in France. It appeared for many years on *des femmes'* publications but has now been replaced by Antoinette Fouque.

⁶⁶ Duchén, *Feminism in France*, 24.

Moi, personnellement, j'ai fait des efforts. En France, j'ai travaillé. Je suis allée voir d'autres femmes, j'ai discuté avec elles, je leur ai proposé mon amitié, mais si je ne l'avais pas fait ça n'aurait pas eu lieu. Et je continue, en octobre mon Centre a organisé ici un énorme colloque sur la différence sexuelle et j'ai invité des femmes d'autres Universités, mais aussi des philosophes, des journalistes, des écrivains. Mais c'est toujours moi qui ai pris l'initiative. . . Ce n'est pas parce que les femmes ont de la mauvaise volonté, mais parce qu'il faut avoir un esprit capable de communauté et les femmes sont souvent, comme ça, fatiguées.⁶⁷

Cixous's account glosses over the tensions and the reasons that certain women would have been reluctant to associate themselves with Cixous or *Psych et Po*, such as grave differences in political stances as well as resentment that *Psych et Po* came *de facto* to represent all feminism in France for Anglo-American academic circles. Of course Cixous was, alongside Antoinette Fouque (the founder of *des femmes* and leader of *Psych et Po*) very much *Psych et Po*'s figurehead, and in light of this, it becomes clear why women intellectuals with other political convictions might not wish to align themselves with Cixous. She became involved with Fouque's activities in 1975—the year declared by the United Nations to be International Women's Year and marked in France by vigorous campaigns to raise awareness of violence against women: 'je me suis sentie un peu "sauvée"—en tout cas soulagée, et grandement épargnée—lorsque j'ai rencontré Antoinette Fouque'.⁶⁸ Although Cixous delegated to Fouque the mandate of political action, her literary-poetic engagement was such that from 1975 until the late 1990s she published almost exclusively with *des femmes*, but perhaps as a result of the departure of Fouque to California, and the decreasing influence of *des femmes*, Cixous's most recent works have appeared at another publisher,

⁶⁷ Cixous, 'Entretien avec Hélène Cixous (mai 1991)', interview with Laura Cremonese in *Dialectique du masculin et du féminin dans l'oeuvre d'Hélène Cixous* (Shena Editore: Italy, 1997), 147.

⁶⁸ Mireille Calle-Gruber and Hélène Cixous, 'On Est Déjà Dans La Gueule du livre entre tiens', *Hélène Cixous, Photos de Racines* (Paris: des femmes, 1996), 16.

Galilée. But in 1979, the influence of *des femmes* was such that an almost forgotten Assia Djebar, after a decade-long silence, re-entered the literary scene with a splash after giving them the manuscript of *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*.

Psych et Po's strategy was to disturb the existing patriarchal system, particularly its unconscious structures, by working like moles, which was in contrast to the *femmes révolutionnaires* who believed in confrontational action. *Psych et Po* also adopted a forceful internationalist strategy. This is very much in evidence when Cixous explains to Laura Cremonese: 'à l'étranger je suis lue et ma force – ce qui vient, si vous voulez, du lecteur et qui est essentiel pour moi comme écrivain—vient d'Angleterre, des Etats-Unis, du Canada etc'.⁶⁹ Cixous, somewhat dogmatically, argues *Psych et Po*'s hostile position towards the term "feminism" in an interview from 1977 with Françoise van Rossum-Guyon:

Pour moi, de façon extrêmement précise, le féminisme aujourd'hui est une idéologie qui, à la limite, est réactionnaire . . . je me trouve dans une position défensive et négative, obligée devant le déferlement du mot de tous les côtés de dire cette chose bizarre: "Je ne suis pas féministe".⁷⁰

From the above, it is clear that Cixous considers certain "feminist" groups to be mere duplications of patriarchal systems: her own political positions, at this point closely aligned with *Psych et Po*, aimed to destroy patriarchy by destabilizing hierarchies and binary thinking, as elaborated in 'Le Rire de la méduse'. Although her rejection of the appellation 'féministe' has irritated many feminists, her statement 'Je ne suis pas féministe' must be understood in the context of the debates occurring in France at the time, and the fact that this umbrella-like term came to shelter many different views, many of which clashed with Cixous's and *Psych et Po*'s beliefs.

⁶⁹ Cixous, 'Entretien avec Hélène Cixous (mai 1991)', 146.

⁷⁰ Cixous, 'Entretien avec Françoise van Rossum-Guyon', in *Revue des sciences humaines* 42, no. 168 (1977), 481-482.

An additional component of the polemics surrounding the use of the term feminist is that the Anglo-American academic establishment categorised Cixous as one of the “French feminists” after the publication of 'Le Rire de la méduse'—the essay that transformed Cixous into an international figure. Christine Delphy, a feminist writer on the French scene, reveals the process by which the "Holy Trinity" (Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Cixous) have come to be considered "French feminism" as more than a question of accessibility or access to texts; instead Delphy convincingly argues that 'French Feminism is an Anglo American construction that distorts the reality of the French women's movement in France'.⁷¹ It is certainly problematic, but perhaps more complicated than Delphy here acknowledges, that Cixous refuses to call herself a feminist, and clearly within France, neither she nor for that matter Kristeva are considered as occupying a very central role in feminist debates; rather Cixous is best known for her plays, and then her fiction; Kristeva as a theorist. Delphy stresses that the creation of "French feminism" is an imperialist gesture; moreover, a particularly destructive one, because it has transformed the relationship between how feminists in France see themselves and how others see them into one of observed and observers, object and subject.⁷² Going one step further, Delphy provocatively argues that several academic texts, including Toril Moi's: *Sexual/textual politics: feminist literary theory* (1985) and Alice Jardine's *Gynesis : configurations of woman and modernity* (1985), in fact themselves constitute "French feminism". As Delphy argues, the American focus on a few French thinkers occurred because it suited particular ends; in other words the valuing of "essentialist" writing, of which she believes Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray are examples, maintains the status quo and ignores, for example, the ongoing research into gender formation. To be sure, "French feminism" only imperfectly reflects the totality of the women's movement in France; and the extent to which each of these women's thinking

⁷¹ Christine Delphy, 'The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move', *Yale French Studies: Special Issue Another Look, Another Woman: Retranslations of French Feminism*, no. 87 (1995), 190-221.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 190.

and work has been affected by that of Foucault, Derrida and Lacan is problematic.⁷³ Cixous herself balks at the tag "French feminist", and perhaps, it would no longer be advantageous or useful to read her works through this filter.

Although Delphy and Cixous are on different sides of the political fence, Delphy's analysis adds much to the understanding of the critical reception of Cixous's oeuvre. Mireille Calle-Gruber, an author, respected professor and recent collaborator with Cixous, summarizes the critical situation in the following excerpt from an interview with Cixous:

Par "théorie" tu te réfères ici, en particulier, à une situation nord-américaine dont les échos reviennent à présent en Europe et qui, sous le nom de "théorie féministe", s'est limitée, excluant tes livres de fiction, à quelques essais ou articles: *Le Rire de la méduse*, *Sorties*, les interventions de *La Jeune née*. Procéder à cette amputation est injuste envers ton travail qui est pluriel : débordement ; qui questionne sans cesse ce qu'il dessine.⁷⁴

Calle-Gruber argues that partly as a result of a lack of translations, but mostly because it was convenient, a single conception of Cixous's thinking has been formed—one that fit well with the urgencies of the late 1970s and 1980s when Women's Studies were being founded, women authors re-discovered as well as valorised and when "French theory" has become a requisite in Literary Theory courses in many Anglo-American universities. At the same time, such renown has meant that Cixous's oeuvre attracts international attention.

The nature of Cixous's writing practice, which contains an emphasis on reading strategies, has had the consequence that critical attention often focuses at length, and at times, almost prescriptively on how best to read her oeuvre: 'How to write *on*' (Cixous)

⁷³ Delphy, 'French Feminism', 217-221.

⁷⁴ Calle-Gruber and Cixous, 'On Est Déjà', 14.

without ruthlessly crushing beneath the weight of discourse that to which one wants above all to grant the chance of a certain lightness on the page, the chance of flying to meet the other, of touching her or him without touching'.⁷⁵ Kamuf's question is a difficult one: how does one determine whether a critical analysis allows the Cixousian text to breathe. Critical discourse *crushes* Cixous's texts like tanks rolling over bodies, according to Kamuf, especially the tendency to lump her texts with "French feminism":

There is, however, another circumstance dictating an especially circumspect approach to the writings of Hélène Cixous if we would not crush them under too much critical weight.

It is the circumstance of Cixous's reception as "French feminist theorist" in certain Anglo-American circles.⁷⁶

Clearly the appropriation of Cixous as a "French feminist" has obliterated certain aspects of her texts, and Kamuf rightly claims that Cixous's texts are delicate ones that resist appropriation, mapping, and analysis, and that the literary quality to the texts, 'expression, style, metaphor and poetry' ought to be treated as 'adjuncts to thought, substance, and so forth'; however, adopting Cixous's own circumspect approach to her own texts may at times elucidate them, but it is also a prescriptive approach that implies there is one "best way" to read her texts.⁷⁷ This is problematic, given an important contradiction in Cixous's writing that discourages critical proximity, for, with a few notable exceptions, her texts cannot be said to welcome the reader. At times, her writing even alienates the readers with the proliferation of "insider" dedications and references; for example, part of the stated design of *Hélène Cixous, Photos de racines* is to address Anglo-American mis-readings, but the main piece of the book 'On Est Déjà Dans La Gueule du livre entre tiens' manages, from

⁷⁵ Peggy Kamuf, 'To Give Place: Semi-Approaches to Hélène Cixous', *Yale French Studies: Special Issue Another Look, Another Woman: Retranslations of French Feminism*, no. 87 (1995), 69.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 73

the title onwards, to be both intimate and alienating. It consists of a conversation between Calle-Gruber and Cixous that spans literature, philosophy and biography; it contains, however, stage-like directions in parenthesis, such as '(rires)', that has the perhaps unintended effect of alienating the reader: this may well be a defensive mechanism that guards against too much intimacy between reader and text, text and author, and ultimately, reader and author.

As we have seen, the politics of the critical reception of Cixous's oeuvre initially appeared as out of touch with contemporary events—no consistent mention was made of her being a Jew: it's even possible to claim that her texts were read to a considerable extent for their language and overall verbal fabric—a consideration Djébar's oeuvre has not enjoyed. And yet, Cixous's involvement with the women's movement in France, and her willingness at times to appear as though she spoke for the French women's movement (or the only one that mattered), led to her person and works being inextricably linked with *des femmes*. Her writing was then read, and more so outside of France than inside, as that of a woman writer concerned with women's issues. Although her writing bears this out, its appropriation as "French feminism" has meant a distortion of the French women's movement as well as the questionable, oft-repeated claim, despite Cixous's disclaimers, that she is "French" or a "feminist". Clearly then the most persistent trend, until a recent backlash, in Anglo-American critical reception has been to read Cixous's writing, through the filter of "French feminism", and to extract from it particular conclusions and to dictate a representative, even iconic position for the author.

La Grande Dame de la littérature algérienne

Often referred to as *la grande dame de la littérature algérienne*, Djébar's oeuvre has elevated her to the cusp of Francophone studies—a position she shares with only a handful of other authors. And yet, as mentioned earlier, Algerian Literature of French expression remains, after a half-century of existence, a marginal one, and this, despite the fact that from 1936 onwards North African women writers alone have written over 500 books—approximately 400 of these published after 1980. Clearly a growing audience, and also an international one, exists for such writing. While some of this writing, such as Djébar's, is of a high literary calibre and forms parts of syllabuses in universities world-wide, others are closer to pulp fiction but the subject matter, often linked to the violence in Algeria, sells in France. Charles Bonn has raised the question of whether North African women's books are popular because of a European horror/fascination with current events:

Comme si les lecteurs européens, principale cible de ces publications, percevaient surtout cette actualité sanglante à travers la situation de la femme : parce que cette dernière est le lieu où se marquent de la façon la plus visible les différences entre la laïcité européenne et l'image de l'Islam que cette actualité diffuse en Europe?⁷⁸

In Europe and America the popularity of movies such as *Not Without my Daughter* (1991), sensational novels and the proliferation of drama-documentaries about Muslim women, such as 'Death of a Princess' (1980), fuel simplistic Western ideas about an Islam that symbolizes the opposite of Western values—a tendency only accentuated after the events of September 11, 2001. One telling example during the recent war in Afghanistan was the

⁷⁸ Charles Bonn, 'Personnage féminin et statut de l'écriture romanesque algérienne de langue française', in *Le Roman francophone actuel en Algérie et aux Antilles*, edited by Daniëlle de Ruyter-Tognotti and M. Van Strein-Chardonneau. (Amsterdam: Rodopil, 1998), 11.

media images of Afghani women in burkhas, accompanied frequently by great interest on the topic of whether women removed these after the Taliban's fall. As Bonn suggests, the interest in literature by Muslim women writers is, in part, driven by the dramatic way that women are perceived, in Western eyes, as embodying the differences between the West and Islam—a trope centred very much on images, and notably, on the one of the veiled Muslim woman. (The problematic of the gaze, and the image of the veiled woman, are central in Djébar's oeuvre, especially in her films). Perhaps as a result, Anglo-Americans are eager to adopt "Algerian women writers"—especially Djébar because of her exceptional status—as "post-colonial", democratic, and as espousing feminist ideals which can be assimilated to Western ones. Her texts are a 'force for change' and she is 'an important voice of resistance'. Critics hail her books' revolutionary potential, and yet, only about 30,000 readers regularly buy her novels in Algeria.

I do not wish to suggest that Djébar's texts cannot potentially affect the lives of other Algerian women; indeed, once read it is hard to resist either their eloquence or lucid insight. Rather I wish to claim that there is a danger in presenting her as a token Muslim woman writer, as she herself has warned. In 1961 Djébar wrote an introduction—a piece she disowns today and which can be difficult to trace—for a UNESCO sponsored photo-essay entitled *Women of Islam* (1961). Rarely mentioned, this essay never appeared in its original French, was translated without her consent, and she claims to have misplaced the original manuscript.⁷⁹ *Women of Islam* contains an elegant refusal, couched in a tone reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), of the pseudo-colonialist desire to force the model of a European woman onto her Muslim sister. In particular, Djébar takes issue with a well-meaning European voyeurism, 'more infuriating and

⁷⁹ Assia Djébar, 'unpublished interview with Clarisse Zimra (March 1980)' quoted by Clarisse Zimra in 'Disorienting the Subject in Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*', *Yale French Studies: Special Issue Another Look, Another Woman: Retranslations of French Feminism*, no. 87 (1996), 166.

laughable because more pretentious and naive',⁸⁰ and strives to separate the curious from the knowledgeable, the learned scholar from the true expert:

I mean the well-intentioned ignorant stranger who is convinced beyond proof that the benighted Muslim woman must be 'rescued from her misery'. And those less disinterested persons—among those learned scholars—who claim that Muslim women have inferior status in Muslim countries because they are excluded from public activities (...) considering how recently Western women won their various freedoms, Muslim women are only a decade or so behind them.⁸¹

This essay prefigures more recent debate between "first-world" feminists and "third-world" ones, and more specifically, the charge that the former has made of the latter an object to their subject: it is also a warning against Western condescension. In an unpublished interview from 1980, she claims she deliberately misplaced the original manuscript of *Women of Islam*, because 'comme toujours, je me retrouvais la musulmane de service et, ça m'a agacée'.⁸² In the later *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, the title of which narrows the sweeping *Women of Islam*, Djébar re-visited some of her arguments, notably that 'any claim to "emancipate" the Muslim woman at the moment besides making her aware of the general situations—and at the same time her place in the hierarchy of society—is illusory'.⁸³ In many ways, this essay is dated by its appearance on the eve of independence and before Islamic law was re-instated in Algeria. The beliefs, which Djébar outlines in this essay, that Algerian women could value their fragility and that changing minds would suffice to improve women's situation, are unlikely to be ones she espouses today. And yet,

⁸⁰ Djébar, *Women of Islam* (Paris: UNESCO, 1961), 12.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸² Assia Djébar, 'unpublished interview with Clarisse Zimra', 166.

⁸³ Djébar, *Women of Islam*, 14

similar to Cixous her most public and consequential support for women's liberation in Algeria has occurred through the medium of her fictional works and films, often heavily autobiographical ones, and not necessarily through militant action, although of late, notably with *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, she directly addresses the violence in Algeria.

One of the most striking contradictions in Djébar's stance towards Western feminism was her decision to give *Femmes d'Alger* to *des femmes*. On the one hand, this text's attention to the modalities of one specific oppression, namely that of Algerian women, contrasts with the almost universal approach of Cixous's stance, elaborated in 'Le Rire de la méduse', which crystallized *des femmes*'s literary-poetic viewpoint; on the other hand, subsequent to the publication of *Femmes d'Alger*, Djébar has been at pains to distance her work from "French feminism" and its bourgeois tone. Her reluctance to appear as affiliated with *des femmes* may also stem from already having played the role of token Muslim woman, and a wariness of being typecast as such in *des femmes*'s stable of writers. Scant critical attention has focused on this choice of publisher and the contradictions it elicits; to be sure, Djébar never published with *des femmes* again and did not play a visible role in Parisian feminist debates. Perhaps because of a French unease with her unearthing of colonial memories, Djébar has chosen to situate herself at the centre of American Francophone studies first as Director of Francophone Studies at Louisiana University and presently at New York University. One of her frequent collaborators, Clarisse Zimra describes how Djébar now successfully navigates 'the troubled waters of post-colonialism' and is 'comfortable on the lecture circuit of academe, equally at ease in the West as in her native Islam'.⁸⁴

Perhaps the most turbulent and contentious part of becoming part of the American academic circuit is that Djébar and her texts have become emblematic of Francophone writers, and this, when her relationship to the term "Francophone" is a complex one: 'je ne

⁸⁴ Zimra, 'Disorienting the Subject in Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*', *Yale French Studies: Special Issue Another Look, Another Woman: Retranslations of French Feminism*, no. 87 (1996), 161.

sais pas si je suis, disons, une *francophone voice*'.⁸⁵ Additionally, Djébar continually attempts to inscribe non-francophone voices in her writing: 'les gutturales, les ensauvagées, les insoumises'.⁸⁶ Despite a critical willingness to describe her oeuvre as that of a Francophone voice, Djébar prefers to situate herself 'en marge de ma francophonie' and as writing a 'franco-graphie': as Calle-Gruber—who has collaborated both with Djébar and Cixous—persuasively argues, Djébar occupies an 'entrelangues' as a strategy of resistance to 'la nuit coloniale' and 'la nuit islamique':⁸⁷ to this one might add, her consistent defiance of all the labels affixed to her oeuvre and most especially "Francophone writer". Such a stance clearly is that of the border subject—a writer who is willing to use a *métissage* of languages, cultures and worlds, striving to resist classifications and to retain the complexity of their situations.

Cixous's and Djébar's critical reception, as well as the entangled historical and autobiographical events, crucially impacted on their oeuvres. Despite the generally favourable nature of their reception (especially Cixous's), certain perhaps inevitable critical blind spots about the authors' texts and political stances have been highlighted: for example, Djébar's rarely examined ambivalence about Western feminisms or the implications for Cixous of the strait-jacket-like appellation "French feminists". The space, in which these authors write and live, similar to many other "Francophone" or "French" authors, is increasingly in the Western academic world. And yet, they retain a border subject position, which emerges in fictional characters as well as the voice and subjects of their writing. To write for or about those who cannot read you from the ivory towers of academia results in a vertiginous destabilisation of the self—one foreshadowed by the complex negotiations of space, on a multitude of levels—personal, national, corporal and

⁸⁵ Assia Djébar, 'Être une voix francophone', *Ces 1'0ix qui m'assiègent. . . en marge de ma francophonie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), 29.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸⁷ Calle-Gruber, *Assia Djébar ou la résistance de l'écriture: regards d'un écrivain d'Algérie* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larousse, 2001), 17.

psychological—undertaken by the narrators in Cixous's and Djébar's earliest works onwards. To quote Beatriz Colmina: 'the politics of space are always sexual, even if space is central to the mechanisms of the erasure of sexuality'.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Beatriz Colomina, 'Introduction', *Sexuality and Space*, edited by Beatriz Colomina (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 3.

Spatial Dynamics

Les Impatients (1958) and Dedans (1969)

History surreptitiously curls around domestic space, enters its innermost regions and limits the inhabitants' ability to cross the threshold. This is particularly so for women: the architecture of the city and the house enclose women's sexuality and thus erases from public space her body. And yet, border-subjects exist who, because of education, mobility, circumstances or simple daring, not only dream of trespassing but do. What characterises the fictional border subject in Hélène Cixous's and Assia Djébar's second works, *Les Impatients* and *Dedans* is such a willingness to transgress sexual/spatial boundaries.¹ The main character of *Les Impatients* daringly takes a lover, while the narrating 'je' of *Dedans* consistently defies society's expectations. This chapter will investigate these two fictional border-subjects—Dalila and the unnamed narrator of *Dedans*—in relation to three different aspects of spatial dynamics: first, the border subject's separation from the other; second, the proliferation of spatial metaphors that signal the interaction between inside and the outside; and third, history's invasion of the textual domestic space. This triad of spatial relationships elucidates how the fictional border subjects of *Les Impatients* and *Dedans*—the

¹ Assia Djébar, *Les Impatients* (Paris: Julliard, 1958); Hélène Cixous, *Dedans* (Paris: Grasset, 1969; reprint, Paris: des femmes, 1986); References are to the later edition of *Dedans*. References to *Les Impatients* and *Dedans* are given in the main text, except when quotations are insufficiently located.

plots of which I outline briefly below—transgress societal/sexual boundaries and thus lay the necessary groundwork for the liberating strategies in the authors' later works.

The plot of *Les Impatients* is a complicated one: the main character, the lazy, rebellious Dalila, is both attracted and repulsed by her stepmother, Lella. From the neighbourhood gossip, Dalila learns that Lella has a past and, feeling betrayed, she knowingly takes Lella's former lover, Salim, as her own. In order to see him, Dalila blackmails Lella with the knowledge of her past relationship. When Salim leaves for Paris to work, Dalila eventually follows him, but once there he becomes increasingly jealous, and the situation culminates in a violent scene in which he slaps Dalila for going outside without his knowledge. After this, Dalila confesses to Salim that she knew about his past relationship with Lella, and Salim immediately leaves Paris to re-join Lella. Whilst Dalila and Salim were in Paris, Lella re-married, and when her husband intercepts a letter from Salim, he follows the couple to their *rendez-vous* and kills them. Dalila returns home shortly afterwards, and the family's patriarch gives her the responsibility, formerly Lella's, for the other women in the family and encourages her to study.

In contrast to the dense plot of *Les Impatients*, nothing much happens in *Dedans*. In Part I, the unnamed narrator has recently lost her father and lives in a house with her mother as well as her brother; in Part II, she describes a series of unsatisfying lovers, some even comic; and then, at the end of the text, the father returns and the narrator joins him. What *Dedans* contains is a multi-layered exploration of the inside and the outside, language, death and life through dream sequences, sketches and incidents—some of which are inspired by autobiographical events—, linked together by the meticulous investigation of the narrative self. *Dedans* contains the border subject's attempt to move beyond the divisions, within different contexts, between the inside and the outside.

The Border subject and the other

The narrator of *Les Impatients*, Dalila, occupies a peripheral, ambiguous position in her family—both her mother and father have passed away leaving her under the authority of her stepmother and brother—, and she straddles several frontiers, including that between emancipation and tradition. For example, while her friends discuss the liberation of Muslim women, Dalila, who shuns such discussions, 'je leur écoutais parler avec indifférence', boldly acts and takes a lover, Salim. At the same time, Dalila extracts permission to see Salim through the "old ways", including lying to and blackmailing Lella. If she is able to envisage an erotic relationship and act to obtain it, then her tactics reveal an ambivalent link to a traditional, secretive world. In the two significant relationships of the text—Dalila/Lella and Dalila/Salim—the conflict that takes place is dual: on the one hand, Dalila strives to separate herself from a restricting relationship with the other and, on the other hand, she appears to seek out just this dynamic. What fuels Dalila's rebellion is jealousy and a desire to separate from the woman's world that Lella symbolizes.

The relationship between Dalila and Lella can best be characterised as an homoerotic one, because it contains a close symbiosis between the two women based on voice and language: 'j'attendais sa voix, que j'avais trop aimée, grave, traînant sur les mots comme pour les cerner d'une noblesse fugitive. L'arabe, dans sa bouche, retrouvait sa dignité' (I 11). Clearly then Dalila connects Lella with language and in particular with Arabic: this suggests, moreover, Lella's links to the interior world in which the women speak Arabic amongst themselves. In Dalila's eyes, Lella embodies domestic respectability, and Lella does have a privileged position, for other women and men respect her. As a result, Dalila feels similar to a betrayed lover, when she learns 'ce fait incroyable . . . Lella avait un passé' (I 63). When Dalila learns that as a young student Lella had several lovers, 'le secret de

Lella', (I 224), Lella becomes the formerly idealized mother figure who is now fallen from the daughter's graces. Indeed, Dalila's subsequent willingness to hurt and even destroy Lella, whom she loves, comes from her feeling of personal betrayal—Lella has lied to her—, but also from the realisation that the image of Lella is a hollow one. Dalila embarks thus on a journey to sever the 'all-but-unseverable bond between the girlchild and nurturing figure'.²

Similar to Nadja from *La Soif* who spends most of the summer sleeping or lounging on the beach, Dalila is a *pareseuse*: this initially reflects more her unwillingness to confront Lella's past than a voluptuous abandonment of the self. After overhearing the conversation between the neighbourhood gossip and Lella, she takes to bed: 'Les jours suivants, je me servis de ma paresse comme d'un bouclier. Je ne quittai pas mon lit' (I 63). Dalila's laziness becomes then a 'bouclier' that protects her from reality; sleeping serves in part as an 'evasive strategy' and also enables her to prepare for her separation from the maternal figure.³ In *Les Impatients*, erotic undertones are present in Dalila's sleeping: 'Que le sommeil vienne s'abattre sur moi! qu'il vienne recouvrir mon corps qui ne demande que la mollesse des divans, au fond des chambres mortes, oubliées par l'été' (I 12). In this instance, sleep obliterates her stepmother's past erotic relationship as well as foreshadows Dalila's own erotic awakening. No longer able to sleep within the house, which she associates with Lella, Dalila runs outside and falls asleep on a lawn: 'Je soupirai. Transpercée du froid de la terre, je me suis abandonnée à la somnolence, les yeux à demi fermés, remplis du ciel large comme un ventre de bête' (I 13). The voluptuousness of sleeping outside becomes a gestation period for Dalila's rebellion, which 'ventre de bête' clearly suggests.

² Clarisse Zimra, 'Writing Women: The Novels of Assia Djebar', *Substance* 69, *Special Issue: Translations of the Orient* (winter 1992), 71.

³ Zimra, 'In Her Own Write: The Circular Structures of Alienation in Assia Djebar's Early Novels', *Research in African Literatures*, 11, no. 2 (summer 1980), 210.

The recklessness inherent in the border subject, a subject typically willing to transgress sexual boundaries, results in Dalila's open defiance of societal and cultural norms: this is manifest in her dancing before the 'innombrables femmes qui me dévisageraient de leurs yeux vides' (I 14). The dancing prefigures a pivotal scene in *Vaste est la Prison* (1995), written almost 40 years after *Les Impatients*, in which the narrator dances alone at a discotheque in front of 'L'Aimé' and her husband. Reflecting on her dancing, the narrator of *Vaste est la Prison* recalls the reasons why as a young woman she danced in front of other women: 'L'essentiel était de m'écarter le plus possible de la frénésie collective de ces femmes, mes parentes.'⁴ In a similar manner, Dalila strives through dancing, which represents an expression of the body, to distance herself firstly from Lella, but also from the other women present. If Dalila appears to scorn the other women, then she cares nonetheless what they think of her. When 'une petite brune laide' (I 14) mocks her, 'Oh! Les filles instruites, d'aujourd'hui, préfèrent les livres' (I 14), Dalila commandeers the dance floor simply to prove her wrong, but unexpectedly dancing enables a transformation:

Je m'étais levée. La musique avait repris, elle montait martelée, monotone. J'étais au milieu des femmes, cernée. J'ébauchai quelques pas. Une voix grêle déchira l'air. Mon corps frémit... Il ploie, se redresse, se balance... A la fin, il n'y eut plus rien que mes épaules, ma taille, mes hanches qui glissent, et la musique que ne s'arrêterait jamais. Le monde tournait; j'y apercevais maintenant, comme dans un grand voyage, les yeux fardés des femmes; et leur mains qui claquent. La chanteuse parle de départ, d'amour perdu; les autres reprennent en chœur, de la même voix nasillarde, étrange, presque désespérée... Je dus danser longtemps.

(I 14-15)

⁴ Assia Djebar, *Vaste est la Prison* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 62.

Dalila's dancing defies the watching women, including Lella, whose gazes enclose her (an enclosure suggested by 'cerner'), and whom she sees from the distant vantage point of a 'grand voyage'. Given the mechanics of the gaze in Djébar's oeuvre—most often man looking at woman—this is an important instance of women looking upon a woman and, moreover, in a manner that oppresses. The presence of the watching women curtails Dalila's freedom, because it suggests the observance of traditional norms, but Dalila distances herself from them, without their realizing the implications of her actions. The women's desperation, evident in their gaze, makes Dalila uncomfortably aware that this could be her own fate. As a consequence of this realisation, Dalila eludes their gazes by dancing and simultaneously asserts corporal independence.

Dalila's attitude to other women markedly contrasts with the characters in Djébar's subsequent texts who typically seek to come close to other female characters, from whom they are estranged, because of class, language or love. And yet, Dalila's feelings towards other women emerge as complex ones, for she also feels ashamed of having "tricked" them. Mis-understanding the distancing gesture inherent in her movement, the watching women compliment her dancing. Dalila then feels ashamed: 'Je me sentais lourde, honteuse de l'exhibition à laquelle je m'étais prêtée' (I 15). Her shame comes from her defiance, unnoticed by the other women, of societal taboos, for her dancing contains the seeds of her later rebellion. Indeed, throughout *Les Impatients* dancing is a dual metaphor, both the expression of erotic feelings and a distancing from other women: it is an act that defies the containment, both by women and men, of a young women's sexuality.

In another instance, Dalila dances in front of her school friend Mina: 'Je parcourais toute la longueur de la chambre, renversant la tête, secouant mes épaules que je tendais vers Mina, dans une figure improvisée, que je savais indécente' (I 34). The crux of the indecency is Dalila's expression of corporal/sexual freedom, which she recognises as

crossing the line of acceptable behaviour in her societal context, the implications of which escape Mina. Instead Mina compliments Dalila, 'Comme tu dances bien!' (I 35), proving that she too is "blind" to Dalila's transgression. As she dances, Dalila sees her double in the mirror: 'une silhouette fuyante de djinn, un corps qui courait, revenait, se renversait. Il me semblait que, même si je devais m'arrêter . . . la danse de ce nouveau corps continuerait. Pour toujours' (I 35). The *djinn* set into motion here re-surfaces in *Vaste est la Prison*: 'longtemps je dansai; je danse encore'.⁵ The dancing body thus represents Dalila's, and also the narrators of subsequent Djebarian texts, defiance of acceptable behaviour.

Dalila's provocative dancing results in her first encounter with Salim, who principally serves as an instrument enabling separation from Lella begun by the dancing. Dalila's disgust with the women at the party occurs on the level of food: 'Autour de moi, j'entendais les lèvres aspirer en chœur le breuvage brûlant . . . Soudain j'eus en horreur cette nourriture, cette fête; je me levai' (I 15). This image, which evokes the mouth as devouring orifice, contrasts with the description of Lella's mouth, mentioned above, from which flowed an Arabic that entranced Dalila. Here the women's mouths are monstrous: 'je sentais que la joie quasi funèbre de leurs corps, frôlant un désespoir entravé, ne me convenait pas'.⁶ When she flees the party, it is clear that a fundamental shift in her world-view has occurred: 'Je marchais avec un sentiment de libération. Heureuse de sentir mes cheveux sur mon cou, dans mon dos, heureuse du grand air . . . Maintenant, la ville à mes pieds, je dors, tranquille comme une reine' (I 15). Dalila asleep continues thus the apprenticeship of her body begun in the frenetic dancing at the party; however, she now revolts openly against the women as well as the traditions they represent: 'Pendant dix-huit ans, on m'avait empêché d'aimer le soleil rouge, le ciel plein et rond comme une coupe

⁵ *Vaste*, 63.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

fraîche. J'étais enfin dans la lumière. Je m'endormis' (I 16). Asleep, she is similar to the heroine of a fairy-tale and when she awakes, Salim stands over her.

From the beginning of the love story, Dalila, narcissistically perceives Salim as a reflection of her self, in a transference of her homo-erotic feeling. Salim represents the ideal tool to further Dalila's attempt to separate from Lella, for as Lella's former boyfriend, he serves as a reminder of Lella's own transgression, which Dalila intends to re-enact. And yet, Salim turns out to be more seductive and dangerous than Dalila initially realises:

Déjà, à cette minute, j'eus peur de voir dans ses yeux une image de moi qui n'avait jamais existé. C'est si facile alors de céder à la tentation. Il suffit dans ce cas que le regard de l'homme brille un peu trop pour que la femme commence, pour la durée de tout un amour, de toute une vie, comme une danse d'adoration devant elle-même, une danse lascive, cruelle, égoïste.

(I 120)

The recognition that the male gaze can potentially transfix his beloved in a narcissistic dance suggests Dalila's realisation that the couple does not necessarily lead to her own liberation, even if the relationship openly defies acceptable behaviour. As a consequence, Dalila finds herself succumbing to Salim's vision of her as an angel: she becomes a 'belle cloîtrée'—locked in a studio and subject to her lover's jealous whims (I 212). Dalila's lucid insight into the constraining dynamics of the man-woman couple in this context, contrasts with her own actions in her relationship with Salim: her behaviour suggests a mis-placed belief that the couple might be a way out of societal enclosures.

Dalila's homoerotic fixation on Lella shifts to her own image reflected upon Salim. She is, however, oblivious to the effect Salim has upon her: as she watches him sleep, she feels only pity for duping him: 'Pauvre Salim que je trompe, me disais-je en baissant les yeux sur lui. (...) Est-ce le reflet que ton amour me donne de moi que j'aime ou ton visage d'homme, confiant dans le sommeil?' (I 135). She fails to register how she is also tricked:

Il dormait maintenant. Et moi, je pensais. Je pensais que je préférais de moi cette femme assise, en train de veiller sur un sommeil d'homme, à l'autre, la petite fille haineuse qui se dressait contre Lella, qui ne respectait rien.

(I 135)

As with the splitting of the self whilst dancing, embodied in the *djinn* figure, Dalila as subject is split in two: 'cette *femme* assise', and 'la petite fille haineuse'. On the one hand, she appears to long for the respectability that Lella represents; and on the other, she tears down Lella's facade in order to reveal the lies that underpin her position. Dalila of course also deceives Salim—he has no idea she is Lella's step-daughter—and after he abuses her for going outside without his permission, she confesses to him that she knows about his past with Lella: 'Peut-être aurais-je dû, au lieu de plaider, accuser. Mais c'est maintenant, maintenant que tout est fini, que je trouve les mots clairs' (I 224). This indicates her surprise at Salim's reaction—he leaves at once for Algiers to re-join Lella. As Dalila realises, it is her admission of guilt that determines Salim's departure: 'je ne pus m'empêcher de céder au piège inévitable de toute confession: je fus tenter de me sentir réellement coupable' (I 223). If she had willingly played the role of the jealous lover, then Salim's reaction may have been different. Instead, she unwittingly reunites and destroys Lella and Salim—'ces deux ombres' (I 229), and moreover, Salim's departure problematically becomes the means for her liberation, as is suggested by the dawn: 'il faisait de nouveau jour' (I 226).

The couple formed by Dalila and Lella, with its homoerotic undertones and the man as interloper, is not unique to *Les Impatients*, for in many of Djébar's books a female couple appears, typically composed of one "emancipated" and one "traditional" woman: for

example, *La Soif*'s Nadja and Jedla and *Ombre Sultane*'s Hadjila and Isma.⁷ Invariably, events destroy the more "traditional" one—Lella and Jedla die, while Hadjila becomes a prostitute, and this, oddly seems to enable the "emancipated" woman's assumption of a liberated stance that also incorporates traditions. And yet, Nadja and Dalila carry with them the memory of the other, the dead woman, whose death becomes the making of the living one. For example, in the denouement of *Les Impatients*, once the husband murders Salim and Lella, and a newly aware Dalila returns home from Paris, she assumes Lella's role as head of the household. The male head of the family bestows this position on Dalila, 'Je compte sur toi pour t'occuper des autres femmes ici' (I 233) but also indicates that Dalila must resume her studies; in this way, the traditional role expands to include university education.

Throughout *Les Impatients*, women appear in different but all ultimately unsatisfactory guises and, as a consequence, Dalila in her effort to separate from the other (Lella) has no other viable role model to which to aspire. There is Lella who embodies the 'femme exemplaire'; Chérifa—Dalila's sister—the 'femme émancipée' who insists her children speak to her in French; and lastly, Dalila's own fluctuating conceptions of self. When Dalila returns to Algiers, after the deaths of Lella and Salim, she is unable to face her own reflection in the mirror: 'en sortant, j'eus une dernière lâcheté: je n'ai pas osé regarder mon image en face dans l'immense glace du hall' (I 231). Her effort then to fashion a new kind of subjectivity—one that moves beyond the role models offered by the other characters—, and which would include desire and corporal liberation, ultimately appears as unsuccessful, since she relies on (self) deception to achieve her ends. And yet, her experience teaches her prudence—'je voulais m'endormir avec une prudence lente, sans m'engloutir, en écoutant autour de moi le silence' (I 239)—as well as an increased awareness of what surrounds her.

⁷ Djebbar, *La Soif* (Paris: Julliard, 1956); *Ombre Sultane* (Paris: J.C. Lattés, 1987).

If in *Les Impatients* the relationship between the border subject and the other contains homoerotic qualities, then in *Dedans* the narrative self has multiple, bisexual facets, which the text painstakingly examines: 'la nécessité dans l'un ou l'autre genre de se connaître soi-même en détail' (DD 25). In Part I of *Dedans*, the investigation involves 'mon frère', who represents the masculine part of the self: it also refers to the narrator's brother, alludes to the 'brothers' (*les frères*) of the revolutionary war, and evokes Baudelaire's famous final lines of 'Au lecteur': '—Hypocrite lecteur, —mon semblable, —mon frère'.⁸ It is tempting to read 'mon frère' as a purely autobiographical reference to Cixous's brother, Pierre; certainly a later text, *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage*, with its explicit naming of the brother encourages such a reading. In *Dedans*, however, the brother is a complex, ambiguous figure who underlines that the "masculine", "feminine" and also the narrating self are multiple.

Like Dalila, the narrative subject of *Dedans* uneasily flits on the border of different identities:

On m'a dit: tu es, tu as, tu seras, regarde comme il est beau ce petit garçon dans la glace, qui c'est? Je le connaissais, je le voyais tous les jours. Il était là. On me dit: coucou, c'est toi. Je l'ai cru, non sans regret et surtout non sans honte. (Plus tard j'ai su que celui-là c'était mon frère: car mon frère est mon seul toi.)
(DD 22)

The mirror is an important symbol in the portrayal of women in art and in writing; however, here is a departure from the usual association of the mirror with vanity, for the reflection in the mirror is a transformation—the sister becomes the brother. As the authority figure that dictates who the narrative self will be, 'on' makes her believe that the image of her brother is her own. As a result, the narrative self experiences herself from

⁸ Charles Baudelaire, 'Au lecteur', *Les Fleurs du mal* (Librairie des Romans Choisis: Paris, 1926), 6.

early on as heterogeneous, both sister and brother, both 'moi' and 'toi': 'Ainsi je sus qu'il y avait moi et qu'il y avait toi, et que je pouvais être l'un ou l'autre' (DD 25). Brother and sister are inseparable: in one instance, the narrator hears her brother laugh 'avec la même voix que moi' (DD 38). In this way, identity fluctuates between different genders.

Part of the difficulty of shifting self and gender identification is the accompanying 'regret' and 'honte': these are crucial aspects of the narrative self's experience, also present in her interaction with the brother. The narrative self's 'regret' stems from the realization that she would prefer to be one, in other words, to have clear identifications, but instead experiences herself as plural. Indeed, the other and the self share a body: 'ce toi-là qui est lui, qui a le même corps que moi' (DD 23). The shared body suggests that the narrator, similar to the Greek-figure Tiresias, can experience both male and female sexual pleasure. And yet, the narrative subject cannot fully experience libidinal differences, for although they have the same body they are not one, despite her proximity to the masculine. The narrator feels regret first because of her unstable identification that makes her identity multiple, and second, because of her inability to come close to all aspects of the other's experiences: as a result, she perches uncomfortably in-between the self and the other.

The narrator feels 'honte' more strongly than regret, 'mais la honte a des bons côtés quand elle est forte' (DD 22). Guilt and shame are crucial themes in Cixous's oeuvre as a whole, and this reference to 'honte' is significant as it contains many layers: first, there is the narrator's transgression—her fluid self who 'passes' from the self to the other; second, the sexual connotation, i.e. shame over erotic feelings, which Dalila also evoked; third, there is Cixous the writer's guilt. With regard to the last point, in a later essay, 'De la Scène de l'inconscient à la scène de l'histoire', Cixous elaborates: 'Je ne me sentais pas coupable mais je l'étais ou du moins je n'étais pas coupable mais je me sentais coupable, etc. Ma

honte, je la formulais et puis je la renvoyais: tu écris quand on meurt'.⁹ As this suggests, 'honte' is an intrinsic part of the writer's relation to the other: the writer writes, at a safely removed distance, as whole dramas of life and death unfold.

In a pivotal scene, the narrative self and the brother demonstrate the complex relationship of the self to the other, and also, that of the colonized to the colonizer. Here Morag Shiach locates the narrator's refusal of the arbitrary imposition of power: 'Mon frère ou moi ou le chien, qu'importe, l'un de nous est un chien, nous sommes un chien chacun à son tour. J'affirme être un chien libre, mon frère affirme qu'il n'y a pas de chien sans corde, et pas de corde sans maître' (DD 39).¹⁰ The narrator immediately attempts to disprove her brother by outdistancing their fear: 'Exercice: "Regarde, je vais courir jusqu'à ce que ta peur et ma peur s'épuisent à me suivre"' (DD 40). She becomes a dog—'je cours, je cours, je cours, je cours vite, si bien, mes quatre pattes brûlantes, dures', leaves behind her brother, 'Mon frère était si petit et si loin, j'avais peut-être déjà décollé' (DD 40, 41) but is brought back to earth by the cord:

Je m'élevai juste assez haut pour prendre ma première leçon: à peine étais-je détachée que je sentis la corde, chacun de mes membres, et même chacun de mes poils était fixé au sol par des liens invisibles il devait y en avoir des millions. Je tombai, librement.

(DD 41)

The fall here is the imposition of power, and 'la terre m'attendait, nos retrouvailles se passèrent de mots, c'était si naturel', but her brother laughs: 'Mon frère rit, ou peut-être avais-je ri, qu'importe' (DD 42). The refusal of oppressive structures is contained in the

⁹ Cixous, 'De la Scène de l'inconscient à la scène de l'histoire', *Hélène Cixous, chemins d'une écriture*, edited by Françoise van Rossum-Guyon and Myriam Díaz-Diocaretz (Paris: PUV, Saint-Denis, 1990), 27.

¹⁰ Morag Shiach, *A Politics of Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 75-76.

laugh and the complicity between the brother and the sister: 'Et qui sait pourquoi je ris, sauf mon frère?' (DD 38). Here the brother and sister, in their experience of the imposition of power, emerge as subjects without borders between them and, therefore, as individuals with intimate knowledge one of the other.

The phrase 'Nous nous vérifions' implies that, unlike Dalila and Salim, here the brother is more than a reflecting surface for the narrative self (DD 13). In fact, what passes between the brother and the narrative self is confirmation; for example, after the father dies, their mother smiles at her children, 'mais ses regards tombaient dans le vide entre mon frère et moi: nous croyions qu'elle voyait mon père entre nous' (DD 14). The brother and narrative self (mis-) read their mother's gaze; she looks past them towards the future. The togetherness, evident in the shift from 'mon frère et moi' to 'nous', and the future that lies between the sister and brother evokes temporal and spatial passage. The brother and narrative self are separate entities, for the mother can see between them, but they also form a couple, 'nous': thus the interaction between the self and the other stretches towards the future.

At the same time, the brother and narrative self are involved in a passionate love-hate relationship, which unfolds in relation to the dead father. In the beginning of the text, the narrator is absorbed in a book when her father comes home. She refuses to open the gate for him: 'Je n'ouvre pas' (DD 18). If woman is traditionally the guardian of domestic space, then the narrative self here rejects the gestures of such a role, preferring her book. Her brother must open the door for the father: 'Il va ouvrir, mais il crie en partant qu'un jour il me tuera; mon frère attend que mon père ne soit plus là pour me tuer sans histoire' (DD 18). The narrator's stubborn refusal to open the door infuriates her brother. The father's presence means that if the brother were to kill the sister now, then there would be a

'histoire', with its dual meaning of history and story, but once their father dies, instead of murdering each other the brother and sister find themselves marooned in the same cage:

Assis l'un près de l'autre, nous vivons. Nous sommes deux rats tristes dans le gand (*sic*) cube gris. Le pelage de mon frère est brun, ses dents blanches luisent, il a les yeux verts de mon père et ses flancs maigres. Je le hais.

(DD 51)

Violence and contradictions are characteristics of the meeting here of the self and other, referred to as the encounter between two rats in the same cage: an intimacy similar to those between individuals in the borderlands, between the colonizer and the colonized, or between two or more peoples who must inhabit the same 'cube gris'.¹¹ If the brother and the narrative self can be laughingly defiant together, then they can also hate each other. And yet, 'les disparitions de mon frère sont fréquentes, mais de courte durée, parce que j'ai besoin de sa présence à côté de moi' (DD 65). In a similar manner, in *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage*, the brother's memories of events forms a necessary part of the narrative: such a gesture undermines the authority and linearity of the narrative by making the narrating 'je' plural. He is as essential to the story as the narrative self. The relationship between the brother and sister might also be read as a metaphor for the one between the author and the reader: the reader is the author's other—beloved, hated and necessary for an exchange.

What characterises the fictional border subject's interaction with the other is, therefore, a willingness to transgress sexual boundaries, and an often self-serving awareness of the other within and without.¹² For example, Dalila shifts her homo-erotic identification from Lella to Salim, and then defies societal norms, resulting in violence that also liberates her,

¹¹ See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999).

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

while the narrative self in *Dedans* claims both the masculine and feminine as her territory, as well as the inside and the outside. What is crucial here for Cixous as writer is the exchange between the self and the other: 'je crois que quand j'écris, c'est parce que quelque chose va passer de l'une à l'autre, aller et retour'.¹³ If women's sexuality has traditionally been contained within visible limits, such as the length of a skirt, or the walls of a house, border subjects such as Dalila and the narrator of *Dedans* obstinately defy such constraints.

Inside-out, interiors/exterior, architects

Mark Wigley argues that in the past architects designed houses specifically intended to prevent women's sexuality, considered to be uncontrollable, from overflowing societal boundaries.¹⁴ Thus interior or domestic space, which from the earliest buildings onwards was divided into masculine and feminine spaces, played a part in the constitution of the private subject by establishing and maintaining sexual divisions.¹⁵ Given the importance of the harem in the North African cultural imagination, it is significant that in *Dedans* and *Les Impatients* Cixous and Djébar investigate the limits of and passages between *ma maison* and *la ville* in their 'houses of fiction':¹⁶ consequently, these texts' privileged metaphors are interiors, including doors, passages, and feminine/masculine space. In part a recognition of space's importance in the formation and framing of the border subject, this emphasis also stems from the authors' conception of themselves as architects: 'Je suis une architecte

¹³ Mireille Calle-Gruber and Cixous, 'On Est Déjà Dans la Gucule du livre entre tiens', *Hélène Cixous, Photos de Racines* (Paris: des femmes, 1994), 20.

¹⁴ Mark Wigley, 'Untitled: The Housing of Gender', *Sexuality and Space*, edited by Beatriz Colomina, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 327-389; see also, Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (Virago Press: London, 1996), 8-10.

¹⁵ See Wigley, 'Untitled'.

¹⁶ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2002), 10.

ratée', states Djébar, while Cixous links the textual with a house: 'Je pense qu'un texte est toujours comme une sorte d'immense maison avec des escaliers, on est à telle fenêtre, on lit à tel niveau.'¹⁷ Paradoxically, space both constrains the border subject in *Dedans* and *Les Impatients* and facilitates her liberation.

In *Les Impatients*, there are two cities, Algiers and Paris, and in both places there is a "home": in Algiers 'la maison fermée' and in Paris a 'mansarde' (I 207), a few flights up from Salim's elegant flat. In *Les Impatients*, the inside is associated with Lella, Arabic, the maternal, the feminine but also with death, suffocation, stagnation and darkness. The 'maison fermée' in Algiers has, at the beginning of *Les Impatients*, just emerged from a 'long deuil' for Dalila's father (I 12). The house, its inhabitants and the women's 'brouhaha' at dawn as they crowd around the sewing machines all suffocate Dalila but at the same time comfort her (I 21): 'j'avais passé le plus grand partie de ma vie dans des maison fermées, ou dans des internats gris, eux aussi profonds, pleins d'échos' (I 40). The inside becomes both a tomb and a womb: it incarnates the simultaneously deadening and soothing milieu, closely associated with the feminine, which appears in the *hammam* scenes of *Ombre Sultane* and *Femmes d'Algers dans leur appartement*.

Clarisse Zimra notes that in the Maghrebian corpus men master the outside, and the inside is left to women.¹⁸ To add to this, in *Les Impatients*, Dalila resents the intrusion of men, which she perceives as distinctly sexual in its occupation of space, in the household interior: 'ce que je n'aimais pas, c'était le moment où, dans ces maisons fermées, l'entrée des hommes en dérangeait la paix' (I 38). As soon as the men enter the house, the women busy themselves with preparing food, but 'à cette heure la maison n'était plus un havre; une vague épaisse y déferlait' (I 38). In this way, an interior within an interior exists; a *coeur*

¹⁷ Djébar, 'Assia Djébar', interview with Samia Barrada-Smaoui, *Jeune Afrique*, no. 1225 (27 June 1984), 69; Cixous, 'Entretien avec Hélène Cixous (mai 1991)', interview with Laura Cremonese, in *Dialectique du masculin et du féminin dans l'oeuvre d'Hélène Cixous* (Shena Editore: Italy, 1997), 142.

¹⁸ Zimra, 'Writing Women', 70.

intime composed of the long hours in which the women talk and sew together, while the men are at work. Dalila perceives the men's arrival as an unwelcome intrusion, one that suggests the sexual encounters of the night, 'je les imaginais la nuit, devant l'homme', and this forms the impetus for her subsequent rebellion: 'j'accueillais alors la nuit avec un sourire, c'était déjà celui de la révolte' (I 38).

Tellingly, Dalila recognises that boundaries matter in a society's sexual pattern, but she remains trapped by these even as she strives to escape.¹⁹ Zimra reads *Les Impatients*, as a 'mad flight out of the harem', but it is also significant that Dalila flies out of one kind of 'harem' directly into one conceived for her alone in Paris (Salim's 'mansarde') and finally regains the enclosed domestic space of home. In this way, her flight has a circular shape—one determined by her realisation that escaping her society's sexual patterns is neither simple nor costless. When Dalila meets Salim in front of a cinema she turns inside out "acceptable behaviour" by pursuing her object of desire in outside space. After Dalila sees Salim for the second time, in the garden of her friend's house, they set a date to go to the cinema. In this way, their first planned *rendez-vous* occurs, and perhaps can only occur, outside of the familiar context of home, language, and culture. The couple meets in the 'quartier européen' of Algiers, Dalila addresses him in French with a formal 'Bonjour, monsieur', and a child begging for money mistakes the couple for Europeans, pleading in broken French, 'Missiou, madame' (I 43-44). Prior to Salim's arrival, Dalila almost flees: 'Dans la rue, les glaces des vitrines me renvoyaient un visage de petite fille perdue, sur le point de s'enfuir' (I 40), but the gaze of 'Européennes à la peau bronzée, aux larges décolletés' coupled with the memory of Lella, 'l'image de Lella se leva en ma mémoire' (I 40), enable her to go forward with her defiance and meet Salim. Dalila conquers her fear

¹⁹ Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (London: Al-Saqi Books, 1985), 137.

of meeting Salim, which consists of a dread of trespassing societal, sexual divisions, because of the foreign-ness of the setting and her passionate feelings towards Lella.

The foreign setting within the familiar city, Algiers, contrasts with Dalila's home, in which the women still scurry to their rooms when the (blind) patriarch comes out: it sets, moreover, the stage for Dalila's and Salim's relationship that concludes in Paris—a city apparently removed from Dalila's geography and culture, but in fact also part of her references, since she is French educated. When Dalila arrives in Paris, she watches from the Jardin de Luxembourg as Salim leaves his apartment building accompanied by friends. Unwilling to surprise him when he is with others, she instead contemplates the garden: 'Enivrée par la vue des grands arbres dénudés, des pelouses que l'automne avait déjà grillées, je m'aperçus que j'avais oublié Salim' (I 189). This is notable, because for the first time Dalila forgets by *seeing* a landscape and the people in the park, instead of by sleeping. Her awakening to the outside world is her 'vengeance: ces minutes de bonheur, seule, dans ces lieux que je découvrais avec avidité' (I 189). As a consequence of this experience, Dalila postpones surprising Salim and checks into a hotel: 'je me sentais forte d'avoir passé la première journée de ma fuite, seule' (I 190). Her 'fuite' from home contains a 'fuite' from Salim, for she cannot tell him about exploring Paris alone and sleeping in a hotel without appearing to have betrayed him.

Similar to many of Djébar's female characters, Dalila becomes if briefly a *marcheuse*: 'j'avais envie de sortir, de voir le ciel bleu, de sourire au monde, de marcher' (I 192). The thirst for the outside makes manifest the character's desire for corporal liberation, but at the same time Dalila fears the consequences of her transgression. When a young man approaches her at 'la pointe du Vert Galant' and asks 'on se promène?' Dalila turns her head away, and 'ma joie était tombée, là, sur l'herbe' (I 192). Shortly afterwards, she sees Salim and is 'soulagée' (I 193). Corporal freedom, incarnated in Dalila's ability to walk

alone in Paris, ultimately frightens her, for Paris is, somehow, threatening. Dalila learns to dislike the cafés and the cinemas and, in particular, the 'regards' of French women 'en deux temps': 'quand j'entrais avec Salim dans l'un de ces lieux publics, je les sentais briller, puis se baisser, se tasser' (I 197). Salim chauffeurs Dalila around Paris in his car: here the automobile functions as a moveable house that clothes the woman's body, so she can be transported outside without being exposed to the other's gaze. The extension of the automobile will be the 'mansarde', in which Salim locks Dalila while he is at work.

Dalila's defiance of the traditional divisions of space into masculine and feminine domains, which includes walking outside, attending class and so on, stokes Salim's violent jealousy. Whilst in Algiers, Dalila flippantly told her older sister, 'Tu sais de qui je rêve? D'un mari qui m'enfermerait des journées entières, entre quatre murs. Par jalousie' (I 106). Once Salim locks Dalila in the 'mansarde', telling her 'tu resteras là toute la journée', her views quickly change: 'je sortirai', she thinks, as she picks the lock with a knife and goes out, 'les paumes ensanglantées' (I 219). Once outside, she feels again the 'ivresse' of walking in the streets: 'Car je suis libre! me disais-je en me retenant de ne pas ouvrir grand les bras, dans un geste d'enthousiasme, pour emprisonner le ciel' (I 220). Her euphoria is transient, for she concludes her victory is not over space but rather over Salim, because she made him suffer, so she returns to him. Dalila's flirtation with the outside—a longing for 'une respiration à l'air libre' as the narrator of *Vaste est la Prison* puts it²⁰—and her subsequent hasty retreat to the inside reveals an inability to embrace both the interior and the exterior.

Similar to a traditional Arabic house, built in a circular structure with a patio at the centre, and a warren of rooms surrounding it, in *Les Impatients* Dalila is at the centre of the text, and the concentric circles enclosing her include 'the maison fermée' and

²⁰ Djébar, *Vaste*, 320.

Algiers—representative of family and tradition—, but also the 'mansarde' and Paris, which symbolizes absolute freedom but also total confinement. Additionally, the circular structure of the text, which opens with Dalila waking up in her home in Algiers and ends with her falling asleep in the same house, suggest that there is perhaps no escape from the 'endlessly concentric enclosures' of corporal/spiritual confinement.²¹ And yet, the last scene suggests the possibility of breaking down such enclosures, and we will return to this, in the following section, after the investigation below of Cixous's *Dedans*.

In *Dedans* as in *Les Impatients*, the inside, the ultimate symbol of which is the house, is fiercely threatened and guarded. Part of the project of *Dedans* is to turn inside-out the interior, in order to reveal the trauma of the father's death, the mother's mourning, the fluctuating relationships between the self and the other. This textual gesture conjures up an image of an actual scene at the dawn of Algerian Independence: the *pieds-noirs* kept their furniture—sofas, candlesticks, paintings—jealously behind walls in French Algeria. As Djébar writes, 'pendant toute mon enfance, peu avant la guerre qui aboutira à l'indépendance, je ne franchis aucun seuil français'.²² After the owners' exodus at independence, these belongings were poured out onto the streets and seen, often for the first time, by their Algerian neighbours. *Dedans* brings, in a similar manner, the inside to the outside and *visa versa* and, in so doing, attempts to move beyond the dichotomy of inside/outside by suggesting their interdependence and also by investigating what flows between them.

'Ma maison est encerclée. Elle est entourée par le grillage. Dedans, nous vivons. Dehors, il sont cinquante mille, ils nous encerclent' (DD 11): with this image Part I of *Dedans* begins—an image strikingly similar to the circular structures and images present in *Les Impatients*. A fence and 50,000 people enclose the family home: this refers in part to the

²¹ Zimra, 'Writing Women', 70.

²² Djébar, *L'Amour*, 34.

female subject constricted by conditions similar to those of the colonized—unable to freely move outside, but forced nonetheless to 'sortir': 'Je n'ai pas peur, j'ai l'habitude, et puis c'est ainsi, et il y a longtemps que je ne m'use plus à me battre contre l'inévitable: rien n'y changerait' (DD 11). Access to outside space does not necessarily equal liberation in *Dedans*: indeed, the thirst for the outside that characterises many of Djébar's narrators is more ambivalent in *Dedans*, for going outside appears as inevitable for the Cixousian narrator and as a scene of sexual and linguistic battles.

Shiach convincingly argues that the struggle between inside and outside in *Dedans* is, for the narrative self, one of life and death: to be completely outside is impossible and dangerous, yet to accept the limitations of the inside is equally untenable.²³ Here the inside is the family, home, imprisonment/security, the Imaginary, the 'space before language', while the outside is associated with the father, cultural identity (Jewish), the Symbolic, and corporeal dimensions of the self.²⁴ As with *Les Impatients*, the narrative self's exploration of the inside/outside necessarily entails the realization and the experience of space as sexualised. Part I of *Dedans* begins with the words 'Ma maison' and contains the relationship with the brother, discussed above, and its exploration of the bi-sexual. This relationship is, however, absent in Part II, which begins with 'Je suis de nouveau dans ma première ville' (DD 139).

The return to the first city is a metaphor for re-visiting the concentric circles of nature, city and family that enclose and protect the narrator of *Dedans*: 'Autour de moi, il y avait mon père, ma mère, mon frère et moi, et autour de nous il y avait la famille, et ensuite la masse des ennemis' (DD 30). Moreover, the description of an unsatisfactory lover, 'un révolutionnaire' underlines the comfort of such circles by pointing out his inadequacy summed up in an inability to embrace her: 'c'était un homme fort et ambitieux aux bras

²³ Shiach, *A Politics*, 75.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

courts qui ne pouvaient se refermer autour de moi' (DD 162). At the same time, enclosures are menacing, for death surrounds her: 'la mort autour et dedans nous' (DD 150). The death of the father, which is one of the consistent preoccupations of *Dedans*, is associated with the outside and the narrator's desire for language.

Amongst the important themes of *Dedans* are the relationships between language, death and the father. Critics have read such relationships both as metaphors for the Imaginary and the Symbolic and as pure autobiography.²⁵ At times, Cixous has appeared to encourage autobiographical readings: 'quand j'ai commencé à écrire, la figure du père était là, je ne me suis posée aucune question, je n'ai pas dit "Je vais écrire sur mon père", j'ai écrit ce qui était là'.²⁶ Undeniably, the father's role, in particular with regard to sexuality and language, is important: 'J'étais dedans parce que mon père l'avait voulu' (DD 70). The departure point for the father in *Dedans* may well be Georges Cixous, but the father as metaphor includes multiple, often conflicting identities: he is God, the *patrie*, the guardian of language, the one who confines and also liberates. *Dedans* contains, therefore, an investigation of the limits of language. In relation to the father's death, the question appears to be whether writing can potentially re-animate the dead and, in so doing, defy the boundaries of mortality: 'la vie et la mort sont au pouvoir de la langue' (DD 7).

Part of the border subject's apprenticeship of language, which appears as ongoing in *Dedans*, is the experience of sexuality and the outside. When the narrative self slips outside, because of a love affair with a 'voleur'—a noun Cixous plays on in 'Le Rire de la méduse'²⁷—she is a trespasser in a city in which there is no one with whom to speak: 'sous le soleil, je marchais, le long d'avenues infinies, sans rencontrer personne' (DD 159). Similar to a minefield, 'les rues de cette ville s'étendaient de l'océan jusqu'aux montagnes en

²⁵ Martine Motard-Noar, *Les Fictions d'Hélène Cixous: une autre langue de femme* (Lexington, Kentucky: French Forum, 1991), 162.

²⁶ Cixous, 'Entretiens avec Hélène Cixous (mai 1991)', 142.

²⁷ See Chapter Four.

cordeaux droits, étirés et vibrants sur trente kilomètres et personne n'y posait le pied' (DD 159). Picking her way through the 'cordeaux' ('cordeau détonant' is a tube filled with the explosive melanite), which divide this threatening city, the automobiles 'fixaient leur yeux vitreux sur moi' in a portrait of solitude (DD 159). Unlike Dalila who contends with the empty gaze of other women, the narrative self here encounters only the glassy eyes of modernity. She transgresses, 'je contrevenais aux coutumes', but no one stops her, 'parce que nul ne rompt jamais le rythme poissonneux du courant'—a 'courant' can also refer to an electrical current, which was extensively used in Algeria during torture sessions (DD 159-160). The mixture here of love, loneliness, violence and even a suggestion of torture evoke for the narrative self the danger as well as desolation of outside.

Yet, the narrative self clearly learns to bridge the boundaries of inside and the outside by the end of *Dedans*: 'Je commençai par me séparer de tout, non sans peine' (DD 205), and in a circular motion, she returns to 'la maison. C'était notre maison' (DD 205-6). Bride-like she chooses a dress, 'bleue comme la mer'—mer here suggests also la mère—and she lies down on her bed, with the dress floating around her, 'épousée, je suis jeune et j'attends la nuit' (DD 206). She races through the city, 'la ville est longue et la nuit brève, je cours, je suis un volubilis délirant' and arrives at two doors: one that is white and the other blue (DD 207). However, in her impatience the narrative self has forgotten the borders, walls, stairs, porches and the others: at this moment, 'cette femme au long cou brun vêtue d'une robe trop étroite et trop large, d'un bleu fané' seizes the narrator at the waist and snatches a piece of her dress (DD 207). After this strange apparition, both mythical and fairy tale-like, the narrative self crumples to the ground, discouraged; however, there is one consolation, 'je me réjouis de pouvoir parler, que j'aie dix ans, trente ans ou soixante, et de pouvoir dire merde merde merde à la mort' (DD 208). The implication is that ultimately writing transcends the limits of life and death.

And yet, in *Dedans* a series of concentric circles surround the narrative self: the innermost recesses include the relationship to the brother, the father and the lover, and the exit turns out to be a non-exit: 'viens, dit-il, allons en prison, nous deux ensemble' (DD 209). However, by the end of the text, the multiple 'tu' is able to enclose, or embrace, the 'je': 'tu seras en haut et en bas et je serai dedans' (DD 209). In a similar movement, the final, difficult sentence of the text, 'Dehors le mystère des choses s'asséchera, les générations reflueront morts sur mots sous le soleil, mais dedans nous aurons cessé de mourir' (DD 209), returns full circle, with its reference to the sun, to the first sentence: 'Le soleil se couchait à notre commencement et se lève à notre fin' (DD 7). 'Notre fin' refers forwards to 'les générations reflueront morts sur mots', which refers with the verb 'refluer' suggesting a backwards movement, where 'les mots' replaces death: 'dedans nous aurons cessé de mourir'. In this way, Cixous erases the division of inside/outside and life/death by focusing on the dawn, symbolized by the sun, of language's ability to surpass limits.

If the politics of space are always sexual, then for the border subject, who is a subject intensely conscious of limits, boundaries and inside/outside, the transgression of forbidden space involves potential disintegration of the self. The final passages of *Les Impatients* and *Dedans* describe a border subject in flux, one who has survived passage from inside to outside, and remains, in an *entredoux* between the self/others and inside/outside. The authors draw upon North African architecture with its circular structures to portray the border subject, the family, the home, and the city as constraints. As Homi Bhabha points out, history invades even the innermost domains of domestic space, and consequently, 'the borders between home and world become confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is

disorienting'.²⁸ The invasion of history into domestic space becomes particularly salient in the colonial situation, in which the borders between home and world shrink together.

Algerian realities, revolutions, and illusions

In a little remarked upon interview with Kathleen O'Grady in the late 1990s, —which is only partly available in French—Cixous tossed the literary equivalent of a hand grenade into the critical commentary on *Dedans*:

My first narrative which was called *Dedans* reads in fact as an oblique ethico-political treatise on the conscious and unconscious situation in Algeria between the '40s and the '60s — one is not obliged to read it in that way, but that is what it is.²⁹

Although the text is set in Algeria and includes the brief appearance of a revolutionary, references to the Algerian situation are oblique at best and, therefore, it is unsurprising that no critic has read *Dedans* as an 'ethico-political treatise on the conscious and unconscious situation in Algeria'. And yet, Cixous's comment is intriguing and warrants serious textual consideration: at the same time, it seems important to emphasise that *Dedans* is an elastic text that contains and incites a number of possible readings. Why critics privilege certain readings and others are never undertaken forms part of the politics of critical reception, but

²⁸ Bhabha, *The Location*, 9.

²⁹ Cixous, 'Guardian of Language', interview by Kathleen O'Grady, translated by Eric Prenowitz, in *Women's education des femmes* 12, no. 4 (winter 1996-7): 6-10. Partial excerpts from the original French are available at <http://www.english.ucsb.edu/faculty/ayliu/research/grady-cixous-fr.html>.

it appears to be a consistent feature of Cixous's critical reception that, for the most part, it overlooks her "Algerian-ness", whilst accentuating her woman-ness. Additionally, without being overly suspicious, her comment above might be perceived as an artificial squaring of *Dedans* with her recent, explicit poetic writing on the political tragedy of Algeria, such as 'Lettre à Zohra Drif' and 'Mon Algérieance'.³⁰ The day-to-day Algerian reality, which Cixous claims *Dedans* investigates, forms, according to Djébar, the substance of *Les Impatients*: 'J'ai écrit un deuxième roman en voulant transmettre une réalité algérienne'.³¹ The initial critical reaction to *Les Impatients* dismissed any political content but more recent readings support Djébar's claim. How a political reality emerges in the textual space will be the final aspect of this chapter's investigation.

The question of how and whether the political emerges through the poetic remains fraught, as is best evidenced by the critical reception of the authors' oeuvre. Djébar believes that the political drama of her country has been intertwined with her writing and life from the beginning of her publishing career, shifting from the background to the forefront of the poetic. If *La Soif* was self-indulgent, according to irate revolutionaries, then it is important to underline that *Les Impatients* was not read, when published, as reflecting an Algerian reality. It is true that *Les Impatients* is not about the war. Although the title of *Les Impatients* is plural and suggests urgency, the textual focus on Dalila, makes it an unlikely title, perhaps *L'Impatiente* might better suit the content. And yet, the final scene of *Les Impatients* contains Dalila's political awakening and evokes the war.

One day shortly after Dalila's return to Algiers, she sets out on a walk similar to her Parisian promenades: 'Je marchai longtemps, tout ce jour' (I 236). As she walks through Algiers, past the Casbah that crouches cat-like in front of her, 'là-bas, tache blanche

³⁰ Cixous, 'Lettre à Zohra Drif', *Leggendaria* 14 (April 1999), 4-9; 'Mon Algérieance', *Donnawomanfemmes*, no.1, no.41 (January-March 1999), 70-92.

³¹ Djébar, 'Ecrire Dans La Langue adverse', interview with Marguerite Le Clézio, *Contemporary French Civilization* 10 (December 1986), 234.

inclinée, comme un peu de lait coulé, comme une langue qui lèche le revers de la colline, la Casbah se tasse sur elle-même' (I 237), she comes across a crowd, in the middle of which a child, accused of stealing, cries with 'un début de lyrisme', 'Ils mentent!' (I 237). Moving away from the crowd, Dalila strives to retain 'la voix, cette joie', asking herself: 'Si ce n'était pas plutôt une sorte de grâce que méritent certains êtres, certains peuples' (I 238). In another reference to the situation in Algeria in the 1950s, Algerian suffering is likened to 'le chant d'un enfant victorieux sur les coups' (I 238).

Dalila's newfound awareness of the outside world, evidenced in these allusions to the war, appears in the association of the city with the individual: 'Je venais de comprendre que les villes sont comme les êtres: les passions que l'on croit mortes et l'orgueil qu'on croit vaincu, laissent sur leur visage un écho qu'on ne sait définir' (I 239). If history scars the city, then the border subject's face also reflects oppression, but the passions and the pride buried behind the buildings or beneath the skin are only *apparently* vanquished. Making a similar point, Albert Memmi claims, 'Ah! ils ne sont pas beaux, le corps et le visage du colonisé! Ce n'est pas sans dommages que l'on subit le poids d'un tel malheur historique'.³² Dalila likens the city to the individual's face, and Memmi points out that oppression leaves its mark on the defiant face of the colonized. This demonstrates both Djébar's and Memmi's struggle to undo the depersonalisation of the colonized by emphasising the visibility of oppression—its impact on the city, the body, the face, and by extension, a people.

Clearly then, as Evelyne Accad points out, it is possible to see an 'oblique response' present in *Les Impatients* to the criticisms made by revolutionaries of *La Soif*.³³ At the same time, Djébar resolutely focuses on her preferred textual preoccupations (women, women's sexuality and corporal liberation), and the war is not her central subject in *Les Impatients*.

³² Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé, précédé de portrait du colonisateur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 136.

³³ Evelyne Accad, 'Assia Djébar's Contribution to Arab Women's Literature: Rebellion, Maturity and Vision', *World Literature Today* 70, no. 4 (Autumn 1996), 804.

The narrators of *La Soif* and *Les Impatients*, who trespass into public space and commence the apprenticeship of their own sexuality contrast, however, with the far more moderate stance Djébar adopts with regard to "the women question" in the photo-essay *Women of Islam* (1963). In this essay, written four years after *Les Impatients* and one before independence, she opts for a more holistic approach that includes a gentle development of an entire society's consciousness and effectively ignores her fictional narrators' far more iconoclastic gestures. The works that followed were less daring on the "women question"; for although *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* (1962) and *Les Alouettes naïves* (1967) directly grapple with the Algerian revolution from the perspective of women refugees, fighters and prisoners, they might also be described as "politically correct".³⁴ Indeed, *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* is regularly taught in Algerian high schools, because of its description of the political awakenings of several women during the French-Algerian war. *Les Alouettes naïves*, ostensibly concerned with the Revolution, includes, however, a central section that contains what Zimra signals as 'women's erotic self-discovery',³⁵ which marks a radical turning point for Djébar:

I felt as if . . . as if I was exposing myself doubly. First, because as an Algerian, but one living—or so it seemed—as a Westerner, I was somewhat exposed already. Second, because writing about my innermost self felt like exposing myself further: I more or less chose silence. As if I could not see past that inner core, as if . . . to write was to commit suicide.³⁶

As this suggests, Djébar wrote her first two novels, which she has taken pains to describe as fictional, by 'turning my back on my own life'.³⁷ Yet, there are tempting

³⁴ Djébar, *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* (Paris: Julliard, 1962); *Les Alouettes naïves* (Paris: Julliard, 1967).

³⁵ Djébar, 'Woman's Memory', 169.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 169.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

parallels between author and narrator, for example the French education, the mobility and so on. If Djébar did incorporate autobiographical elements into her fictional texts, it was nevertheless not until she wrote *Les Alouettes naïves*, that she came face-to-face with the dilemmas of autobiography: one of the consequences of this encounter, tied to the question of language, was her ten-year textual silence that ended with her first film, followed shortly afterwards by *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*. The reluctance "to expose herself" in autobiographical writing came from the taboos of her upbringing and the 'gap between the two languages, French and Arabic, a gap that mirrors the yawning gap between two societies that still go on functioning side by side, but keep their backs stiffly to each other'.³⁸ Thus it appeared impossible for Djébar to write in "the enemy's language" about herself: the poetic instrument (French) was stained with the unacknowledged political drama of the tortured relations between Algerians and the French.

Cixous's remark that *Dedans* is a treatise on the Algerian situation raises the vexed question of the poetic and the political in what has been read as a chiefly autobiographical or symbolic work: 'l'auteur elle-même, qui se présente dans un jeu autobiographique sans camouflage, malgré le sous-titre de roman que porte le livre'.³⁹ And yet, if the autobiographical aspects of *Dedans* are infallibly mentioned, the implications of using autobiographical material are rarely discussed in relation to her fictional writing. Here I'll re-consider *Dedans*, keeping in mind Cixous's claim that it is as a treatise on the conscious and unconscious Algerian situation just before, during and after the war, and arguing that Cixous's experience of growing up in Algeria is an autobiographical departure point.

Let us begin by claiming that the father is both the narrative self's father and *la patrie*, in this instance France, a figure able to insinuate itself into the "inside" of the Algerian unconsciousness—an interior space symbolised in both the French and the Algerian

³⁸ Djébar, 'Woman's Memory', 172.

³⁹ Motard-Noar, *Les Fictions*, 162.

imagination by the harem, which functions as the repository for the Algerian "secret", fantasised about both by the French and Algerian male. France's "safe passage" into Algerians' unconscious most likely occurs through the French language, but it is also this language and the *Droits de l'homme* with which it is associated, that will inspire Algerians to cast off the French yoke. At the same time, the French language will continue to oppress the Algerians, even once the French colonials packed their bags, as Frantz Fanon foresaw: 'parler....c'est surtout assumer une culture, supporter le poids d'une civilisation'.⁴⁰ The importance of language in *Dedans* is thus far from arbitrary: it is an instrument of liberation but also of oppression, as *Arabisation*—the implementation of Arabic as the 'official language of Algeria'—following closely on the heels of Independence, would paradoxically demonstrate. The institution of Standard Arabic, and the importation of Middle Eastern teachers, was intended to build a new national, Arabic identity, and as a consequence, obliterate the "uncontrollable" multi-linguism indigenous to Algeria.

The politics of space, in particular different individuals' right to cross boundaries, are key in the colonial drama. During the French-Algerian war, the control of space through checkpoints, in particular with relation to the Casbah, was a crucial element in the paratroopers' strategies. The Cixous family would also have been unable to freely circulate in the city without being identified as "French". Despite the relatively low numbers of settlers, the Algerians were enclosed by the superior military and economic might of their colonizer, just as once the war began in earnest, neither Algerians nor *pieds-noirs* could feel safe either in their homes or in their automobiles. Additionally, this was a war in which revolutionaries killed revolutionaries, French Generals rose up against France, and *pieds-noirs* ambushed *pieds-noirs*: there were no clear, unproblematic enemies in this conflict. Cixous's experience of the spatial divisions of French Algeria and the shifting boundaries in

⁴⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952), 13.

the war could well be represented by the metaphors of outside/inside in *Dedans*: 'Nous fûmes dehors dedans. Le dehors devint mon dedans'.⁴¹

As I've argued, what is key in *Dedans* is two fold: firstly, the narrator's investigation of space and thus sexuality, and secondly, the flow between inside/outside. Zohra Drif was one of the handful of women bomb carriers during the 'Battle of Algiers' as well as Cixous's schoolmate at Lycée Fromentin in Algiers. In 'Lettre à Zohra Drif' Cixous writes: 'De l'Algérie mon amour et mon épouvante je suis libérée par l'Algérie qui naît. . . L'Algérie me donne mon premier départ'.⁴² If *Dedans* contains, in part, the narrative self's coming to language, then it might also be a metaphor for how Algeria's independence freed Cixous from her feelings of guilt and shame. Simultaneously, although the narrator, a nameless and ambiguous entity, has been read as a representation of Cixous, and this does seem to hold true, is it possible that the narrator is also a metaphor for Algeria? The movement from inside to outside symbolizes the struggle of the country to become independent from France, and the difficulty of disentangling the two countries: this turmoil, until recently repressed, appears in the French consciousness with regard to the French-Algerian war and to a lesser extent, in the Algerian one. The two countries are interlinked by history, memory and desire.

In this way, it is possible to see that the spatial assumes paramount importance in *Dedans*, because of Cixous's autobiographical circumstances: she is dis-placed, "out of place", and belongs neither in Algeria, 'Je n'étais pas chez moi derrière les grillages de mon berceau natal', nor in France, for 'ce pay n'est pas mon pays'.⁴³ The contradictions of Algeria haunt Cixous. On the one hand, her brother was sentenced to death by the OAS and imprisoned for his revolutionary activities; on the other hand, some 15 years later, he along with Cixous's mother would be imprisoned because of false accusations, and then

⁴¹ Cixous, 'Lettre à Zohra Drif', 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 4.

deported with 24 hours notice to France, where they arrived with only one suitcase. The drama of these events, shared by many of the European settlers and Algerian Jews, clearly influenced and inspired Cixous's fictional writing: 'j'ai eu la chance d'avoir pour temps et lieu de naissance l'étrangeté, l'exil, la guerre, le souvenir fantôme de la paix, la douleur, le deuil'.⁴⁴

In the 1950s and 1960s, the space in which Cixous and Djébar wrote was populated by war, but neither writer was comfortable writing an explicit commentary or fictionalisation. In *Les Impatients*, Djébar presciently focused on the corporal liberation of the border subject, while simultaneously, the bomb carriers, such as Drif, hid bombs under their clothing, and thus conquered the right to fight alongside men for their country's liberation. Djébar seems to have foreseen the curious process of forgetting, of which the roots may well be in colonial oppressions, that enabled the "brothers" to forget women fighters and their corporal sacrifices—for example, the bodies scarred by torture—and once more, to entomb women's bodies behind walls. Indeed, the conscious and unconscious situation in Algeria from the 1940s and 1960s, as obliquely described by Cixous in *Dedans*, was one of transition from inside an oppressive system to outside, and then back inside once again: one salient example occurred many years later, in 1984 when the 'Code de la famille' was voted—this annulled the Constitution of 1976, which had given women civil rights. Reading *Dedans* as a treatise on a system of enclosures that constrained the narrative self but also Algeria reveals how this text takes as its departure Cixous's Algerian childhood, her experience of the war, and signals how the containment of a self or a people is linked to spatial dynamics.

It is possible to conclude that in different ways, the fictional border-subjects of *Dedans* and *Les Impatients* make the most of the space she inhabits: Dalila carves out her own

⁴⁴ Cixous, 'De la Scène', 16.

independence by acquiring the right to step across the threshold of sexual norms but also of the house, while the narrator of *Dedans* ultimately breaks down the distinctions between inside and outside. The fictional border subject is perhaps freer, at this point, to revel in and negotiate its instability than the authorial border-subject: she also foreshadows the woman writer's ability to move beyond the boundaries of the constricting structures present in language and literature. As the authors began to journey towards new ways of writing, which explicitly include the autobiographical, they were confronted with their bodies—ones absent, moreover, from political arenas. In the rush for 'subordinated peoples'—here used to encompass both the formerly colonized and others, such as slaves—to re-value their traditions and histories, the effacement of women's bodies risks replicating the colonial subordination strategy. As a consequence, the illusory dreams of the revolutionaries threw up a scaffolding around an unstable, even rotten centre: as this structure appeared increasingly likely to collapse, it was re-enforced by the establishment of new divisions between public and private space, at the centre of which woman, wonderingly, once again found herself enclosed. And yet, in the moment of recognising her plight, she also sees new doors opening to her, for women writers have always crossed frontiers in order to craft liberating strategies.

Strategies for Corporal Liberation

Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement (1980) and
'Le Rire de la méduse' (1975)

By the close of the 1970s--a decade that reverberated with the aftershocks of May 1968--, it had become fashionable for Parisian philosophers and literati to write about the body, and perhaps as a consequence of this, Assia Djebar and Hélène Cixous gave women's bodies a prominent role in their ground-breaking essays and short stories. Djebar put aside her pen during the 1970s, and although Cixous continued to publish steadily with *des femmes*, it was not until the appearance of 'Le Rire de la méduse' that she became, and was for some time, an icon for "French feminism" in Anglo-American academia. Indeed, few essays elicited more commentary than this breath-taking manifesto, notable for the way in which its exuberant style enacts its potentially revolutionary content.¹ Only a few years later, *des femmes* published *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, Djebar's breakthrough work and the first print-run, 15,000 copies, sold out quickly: 'Short stories do not sell in France, some people had told me. There was astonishment at seeing mine so successful; all the more so that, since *Alouettes naïves*, French readers had forgotten me'.²

¹ References to Hélène Cixous, 'Le Rire de la méduse', *L'Arc* 61 (1975), 39-54, are given in the text.

² References to Assia Djebar, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (Paris: des femmes, 1980) are given in the text; Djebar, 'Woman's Memory Spans Centuries', interview by Clarisse Zimra, in *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, trans. Marjolijn de Jager (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1992), 180-181.

In these unforgettable texts, which appear in the authors' oeuvres as triumphant turning points, Djébar and Cixous write, perhaps for the first time, from the authorial position of a border-subject. In this chapter, I will investigate how the authors use this perspective to assess the mis-representation or absence of women's body on literary, political, and/or artistic stages. Cixous's and Djébar's departure points for such an analysis include the experience of colonialism, which led to the authors' re-definition of the position(s) from which they see and write. The hallmark of Djébar's and Cixous's writing practices, as we shall see, is the re-insertion of women's bodies into writing, for it is through the medium of voice and taking into consideration the maternal body that they devise new writing languages. The border subject is thus well placed to transform language, on her own terms, into the cornerstone of a liberating strategy.

Writing, representations, and seeing

Before entering into the textual fabric of 'Le Rire de la méduse', it is helpful to clarify the concepts of 'masculine' and 'feminine' 'economies', for these are key, if approximate, terms in the understanding of *écriture féminine*--the writing practise famously elaborated and enacted in this essay. Cixous's frequently perplexing notions of gender economies involves a re-working of Freud: she adopts and transforms his description of the ways in which the human subject's bisexuality is structured as a response to patriarchal law.³ What distinguishes therefore the masculine and the feminine economy is the relationship to the other: the former is predicated on a repression of the other, while the latter contains a willingness to include the other. We all behave at times as 'masculine' or 'feminine', although Cixous believes that women are presently closer to the feminine economy because

³ Susan Sellers, *Authorship, Autobiography and Love* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1996), 2-3.

of their proximity to the maternal body; therefore, women are better suited than men to practice an *écriture féminine*--the writing practice closely bound to the feminine economy and, as a result, predicated on the respect for the distinctiveness of the other.⁴ Cixous repeatedly claims it is impossible to theorise *écriture féminine*, 'on ne pourra jamais théoriser cette pratique, l'enfermer, la coder, ce qui ne signifie pas qu'elle n'existe pas' (RM 45). One notable characteristic of this writing practice is the potential ability to explode masculine ways of thinking through the inclusion of the other.

When identifying and describing the effects of the masculine economy, the principal agents of whom are men, --'men' in 'Le Rire de la méduse' refers to a heterogeneous group of individuals--Cixous identifies their appropriating strategies, which target women's body, as ones that closely resemble those of a colonial power. In the detailing of this oppressive system, which she claims to be partly based on corporal confinement of the other, she employs the language and images of her childhood in French Algeria. Cixous identifies how women's sexuality has been portrayed in art, literature and public space as mysterious, which results in the literal and figurative confinement of women's bodies in 'la marge', in 'le harem' or 'l'étroite chambre' (RM 41,43). In 'Sorties' Cixous specifically refers to Algeria as a stage on which unfolded the 'spectacle' of the French dominating 'de populations soudain devenues "invisibles"', just as other societies efface the proletariat, immigrant workers, minorities, and women.⁵ Whilst in Algeria, women were pushed to the background of Cixous's consciousness, 'Les femmes: à cette époque je n'y pensais pas', but once in Paris, the colonial experience of a divided and hierarchical colonial society enabled her to recognize women's situation as a related type of oppression.⁶ In this way, the autobiographical enables the authors to pick an alternative vantage point, for in French Algeria rigorous definitions of class and race existed, and here Algerian Jews found

⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁵ Cixous, 'Sorties', *La Jeune Née* (Paris: 10/18, 1975), 128.

⁶ Ibid., 245.

themselves in an ambiguous identity zone--a position between French and Arabs, Christians and Muslims. As a result, Cixous occupies the border subject perspective--one uniquely situated to see the parallels between different kinds of oppressions without, however, assimilating these systems.

Cixous zeroes in on the importance of the body to the colonising power's strategy, for its presence is central to the oppression of a people: 'il ne faut pas que le *corps* de l'étrange disparaisse, mais il faut que sa force soit domptée, qu'elle revienne au maître'.⁷ What constitutes the 'force' of a body includes its desire and sexuality, which is objectified in the colonial setting, for example through explicit mediums such as art or law but also through implicit messages. As a result, the body remains visible but powerless. Using her first-hand experience of colonialism as a stepping-stone, Cixous turns to how, in a similar manner, oppressive structures harness the strength of women's sexuality and bodies in part through myths, propagated by a 'décervelante, meurtrière' societal education (RM 41). This education--one that occurs on various level of society, art and history--is predicated on the impossibility of representing female sexuality: 'Il disent qu'il y a deux irréprésentables: la mort et le sexe féminin'.⁸ Just as the colonizer obliterates the colonized's sexuality, patriarchy effaces women's desire. The usurpation of female sexuality renders women's bodies impotent and thus incapable of posing a menace through their sexuality. The genius of this strategy is that women then come to believe that her own desire or sexuality is non-existent and, as a result, revolt becomes impossible. She becomes, instead, a ghost in her own body:

⁷ Cixous, 'Sorties', 128-9.

⁸ Ibid., 126.

On peut leur apprendre, dès qu'elles commencent à parler, en même temps que leur nom, que leur région est noire: parce que tu es Afrique, tu es noire. Ton continent est noir. Le noir est dangereux. Dans le noir tu ne vois rien, tu as peur. Ne bouge pas car tu risques de tomber. Surtout ne va pas dans la forêt. Et l'horreur du noir, nous l'avons intériorisée.

(RM 41)

This indoctrination occurs of course through language, 'dès qu'elles commencent à parler'. To counteract this, Cixous makes particular use of metaphor, gendered language and cultural references: 'Nous sommes "noires" et nous sommes belles' (RM 41). This phrase obviously echoes the slogans of the Civil Rights Movement, namely 'black is beautiful'. An additional instance of Cixous simultaneously referencing the black movement, Africa and Freud on women's sexuality is when she writes 'le "Continent noir" n'est ni noir ni inexplorable' (RM 47). Clearly there is a danger here that such linkage results in a conflation of situations that differ in their details. Some critics charge that Cixous translates "Africa" from colonialist to feminist discourse, 'the metaphorisation of metaphors';⁹ however, an alternative reading, sensitive to Cixous's awareness of differences between groups and movement, might interpret her subversion of metaphors as drawing connections between different oppressive strategies. Additionally, Cixous carefully underlines the differences between the experience of racial and gender oppression, as her placement of "noires" in quotation marks. By employing "Africa", Cixous does not reproduce the oppressive quality, but rather she usurps the metaphor's power and turns it back on the overlying oppressive structure.

The effacement then of women's body principally occurs through language, and as the material used to represent women, it is shaped to suit the oppressor's ends. As a result, a

⁹ Uzoma Esonwanne, 'Feminist Theory and the Discourse of Colonialism', *Reimagining Women: Representations of Women in Culture*, edited by Shirley Neuman and Glennis Stephenson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 241.

woman who speaks in public knowingly and fearfully transgresses: 'le coeur qui bat à se rompre, parfois la chute dans la perte de langage, le sol, la langue se dérochant, tant parler est pour la femme--je dirai même: ouvrir la bouche--en public, une témérité, une transgression' (RM 43). In a similar manner, a woman writer also battles with the patriarchal interdiction of language, of which Cixous has first-hand experience: 'Je sais pourquoi tu n'as pas écrit. (et pourquoi je n'ai pas écrit avant l'âge de 27 ans)' (RM 40). In 'La Venue à l'Écriture', Cixous tells her story, ultimately a successful one, of how she feared writing but nonetheless came to writing: 'Toi écrire? Mais pour qui te prends-tu?'¹⁰ Speaking, and in particular writing, because it involves manipulating language in a lasting medium, transforms the woman into a trespasser: in order to keep her out, writing is reserved for the powerful: 'parce que l'écriture c'est à la fois le trop haut, le trop grand pour toi, c'est réservé aux grands, c'est-à-dire aux "grands hommes"' (RM 40). What is particularly dangerous about the inaccessibility of writing is that the appropriation of women's bodies, which occurs in written representations, remains uncontested.

l'écriture a été jusqu'à présent, de façon beaucoup plus étendue, répressive, qu'on le soupçonne ou qu'on l'avoue, gérée par une économie libidinale et culturelle--donc politique, typiquement masculine--un lieu où s'est reproduit plus ou moins consciemment, et de façon redoutable car souvent occulté, ou paré des charmes mystifiants de la fiction, le refoulement de la femme; un lieu qui a charrié grossièrement tous les signes de l'opposition sexuelle (et non de la différence) et où la femme n'a jamais eu *sa* parole, ceci étant d'autant plus grave et impardonnable que justement l'écriture *est la possibilité même du changement*. . .

(Italics in text, RM 42)

¹⁰ Cixous, 'La Venue à l'écriture (1976)', *Entre l'Écriture* (Paris: des femmes, 1986), 25.

This is, similar to much of 'Le Rire de la méduse', a powerful condemnation of the systematic method that utilises writing as a key tool in women's oppression. The kind of writing Cixous identifies as repressing women can be characterised as a masculine one: its identifying characteristic is a dependence on the effacement or appropriation of the other. The repetition of the portrayal of women's sexuality as absent, dangerous and/or threatening, whether explicit or oblique, perpetuates women's exclusion from writing. As the object in such writing, she cannot easily transform herself into a writing subject; moreover, what transfixes the women writer on the threshold of writing and halts her step, is that the very fabric of writing, 'la langue', contains strategic structures determined to fortify the omnipresence of the masculine 'I'. To come to write, women will therefore have to imagine an entirely new kind of writing; in other words, a feminine writing inclusive of women's bodies. Cixous focuses, therefore, on the (non-) representation of women's bodies, its permeation of language, and the access denied women to their own sexuality and representation. Clearly Cixous writes here as a border-subject, poised as she is between women's silence and her own personal successful coming to writing.

In contrast to Cixous, Djébar's departure-point for the analysis of the representation of women is the male gaze: she claims that a multi-layered system of gazes, which includes that of the colonials and the formerly colonised, appropriates women's bodies. In order to analyse the dynamics of this complex gaze, Djébar turns to the representations it produces in the works of two European painters. The paintings that frame *Femmes d'Alger* are the one on the front cover by Eugène Delacroix, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1832), and the 1954-55 series of 15 eponymous variations by Pablo Picasso, inspired by Delacroix's work. Delacroix's painting depicts four women, clothed in embroidered tunics with sleeves worn over pants, inside a harem: one lounges on patterned cushions, two are engaged in conversation and an African woman, presumably a slave, glances at them over her

shoulder; Picasso's depicts naked women dancing outside in the sun. Djébar recounts how Delacroix on a visit to Algiers in 1830 penetrated the harem of a *chaouch*, who worked under the French chief engineer of the port of Algiers: 'la vision, complètement nouvelle, a été perçue image pure' (FA 147). What makes for the novelty of Delacroix's vision, as conveyed to the spectator through the painting, is its portrayal of the harem's inhabitants, for the women do not appear as overtly sexual: 'le tableau de Delacroix se perçoit comme une approche d'un Orient au féminin--la première sans doute dans la peinture européenne, habituée à traiter littérairement le thème de l'odalisque ou à évoquer seulement cruauté et nudité du sérail' (FA 149). Perhaps the most vivid example of the colonial's objectification of the "native woman" are the postcards of "Algerian odalisques", usually half-naked, that French soldiers mailed home to France:¹¹ Djébar discerns then a slightly compassionate element in Delacroix's otherwise voyeuristic gaze, perhaps contained in his refusal to portray the women as solely one-dimensional, naked sexual objects.

This is not to suggest, however, that the painting is an expression of the lived reality of Algerian women; indeed Djébar describes it as 'un Orient superficiel . . . dans une pénombre de luxe et de silence' (FA 149). Zimra points out that it is likely that the "authentic Algerian women" in Delacroix's painting were impersonated either by their servants or by Jewish neighbours, whose faith did not impose restrictions on their representation.¹² With this in mind, Delacroix's representation of the 'Orient au féminin' becomes an illusion--a harem staged and designed by the painter for the painter, in a manipulation of the women, absent in reality but present in imagination, of the harem. The Jewish woman standing in, moreover, for the Algerian one during the painting incarnates a further presence that is absent in the final image. If Delacroix's vision is 'complètement nouvelle', then it is also a construction that Djébar transforms into an image

¹¹ On this topic see Malek Alloula, *Le Harem coloniale: Images d'un sous-érotisme* (Paris: Slatkine, 1981).

¹² Clarisse Zimra, 'Disorienting the Subject in Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*', *Yale French Studies: Special Issue Another Look, Another Woman: Retranslations of French Feminism*, no. 87 (1996), 152.

that exemplifies how the onlooker, who gazes at Algerian women, unsuccessfully trespasses, for ultimately 'the painting's "frozen" surface sends back the observer's prying gaze'.¹³

What compounds the transgression inherent in Delacroix's gaze, for he is a foreign (French) man looking at the "harem"--the Arabic word for forbidden or secret--is the other spectators' gazes--the visitor to the Louvre today--to which the painting exposes the women: 'nous mettant devant ces femmes en position de regard, il nous rappelle qu'ordinairement nous n'en avons pas le droit. Ce tableau lui-même est un regard volé' (FA 149). In specific, the spectators' gazes, including those of the reader and the author, replicate Delacroix's transgression: 'ce regard-là nous est interdit' (FA 149). What particularly concerns Djébar is that after the colonials left Algerian soil, the image of woman as the 'interdit' persists for 'le père', 'l'époux', 'le frère' and 'le fils' (FA 150). Women's increased mobility--frequently facilitated by the white silk veil of the Algerian bourgeoisie draped around the body that exposes ankles and sometimes one, sometimes both eyes--becomes, therefore, a dual threat for the man whose honour depends upon the concealment of her body. What if a stranger hastily draws a curtain and obtains an accidental glimpse of 'les autres yeux du corps (seins, sexe, et nombril)' (FA 151)? Then, answers Djébar: 'c'en est fini pour les hommes, gardiens vulnérables: c'est leur nuit, leur malheur, leur déshonneur' (FA 151). Second, the woman outside who circulates also sees: 'une femme -- en mouvement, donc "nue"--qui regarde, n'est-ce pas en outre une menace nouvelle à leur exclusivité scopique, à cette prérogative mâle?' (FA 152). This clearly contains Djébar's gloss on the phrase used to describe the French women's movement, "des femmes en mouvement", but more importantly suggests a variation of the Medusa-like power, for men feel threatened by women's sexuality: 'L'oeil féminin à son tour, quand

¹³ Zimra, 'Writing Woman: The Novels of Assia Djébar', *SubStance* 69, *Special Issue: Translations of the Orient* (winter 1992), 78.

il se déplace, voilà que, paraît-il, le craignent les hommes immobilisés dans les cafés maures des médinas d'aujourd'hui, tandis que le fantôme blanc passe irréel mais énigmatique' (FA 151). The perception of women's sexuality as threatening results in a re-doubled effort to contain it, resulting in its enclosure not so much by walls but by laws: 'Mais cet oeil libéré, qui pourrait devenir signe d'une conquête vers la lumière des autres, hors du confinement, voilà qu'il est perçu à son tour comme menace; et le cercle vicieux se reforme' (FA 151).

In the 1970s, the new 'Code de la famille' was still heatedly being discussed in Algeria, (it was eventually passed as law to the dismay of many Algerian feminist groups in 1984), women circulated in the streets of Algiers like never before, and their participation in the work market quadrupled. Djébar's response to such apparent freedom of movement was *Femmes d'Alger*. 'I miscalculated in targeting an Algerian public that did not materialize'.¹⁴ Perhaps weary of (mis-)representations, Algerian readers appeared uninterested in seeing the fissures in Algerian society, related to gender issues, that these short stories exposed: 's'il était possible hier de trouver dans leur fixité l'expression nostalgique du bonheur ou celle de la douceur de la soumission, aujourd'hui cependant, nous frappe au plus sensible leur amertume désespérée' (FA 153). In a society struggling to find its own identity, pulled asunder by nationalism, woman found herself the unwilling crucible for the new state. For the other's other, one form of oppression had been exchanged for another, many women's post- Independence hopes were dashed, and woman in public space came to represent absence: 'une femme-fantôme!'¹⁵

One legacy of spiritual and physical confinement is that women's bodies cease to exist in artistic, literary and public spaces. When present, woman becomes a vessel for the others' representations, 'quelquefois psalmodiée, déclamée, hurlée, théâtralisée, mais bouche et yeux toujours dans le noir' (FA 7). What remains, in such instances, of the desire

¹⁴ Djébar, 'Woman's Memory', 180.

¹⁵ See Trinh Minh-hà's *Woman, Native, Other* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Djébar, 'De l'écriture comme voile', in *Ces Voix qui m'assiègent... en marge de ma francophonie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), 99.

and eroticism of women is only her voice: 'C'est seulement la voix qui reste'.¹⁶ Although Zimra suggests that the body--as a reality and a metaphor--is the only thing left to women forbidden to represent themselves politically and artistically, even this at times appears doubtful in Djébar's somewhat pessimistic text, which some might consider more realistic or grounded than the ebullient 'Le Rire de la méduse'.¹⁷ Djébar's description of disembodied eyes and voices suggests that at least for some women, appropriation has triumphed, and their 'rapport d'ombre entretenu des siècles durant avec leur propres corps' continues (FA 8).

'Le Rire de la méduse' and *Femmes d'Alger* maintain that women's mis-representation or absence on the political, artistic and literary stage is the crux of their oppression: the authors share the departure-point of the experience of a colonial system. In 'Le Rire de la méduse', Cixous directly identifies writing and language as the site for the effacement of the body, and moreover, as the machine for oppressive socio-cultural strategies. She suggests, however, that the very material--language and writing--used to efface women and their bodies is also a potential tool for their liberation. Writing towards and for a different context, Djébar identifies men's appropriation of women's body as determined by the gaze of yesterday's and today's *maîtres*. What the authors share is an ability to look critically at the contradictions that shape their society's views on women: a view-point uniquely available to the woman, similar to Djébar and Cixous, who because of her position as a border subject escapes such cultural constraints by writing.

¹⁶ Djébar quotes here from the Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad. See 'Anamnèse', in *Ces voix qui m'assiègent: ... en marge de ma francophonie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), 142.

¹⁷ Zimra, 'Writing Women', 79.

Stealing the gaze: writing women's bodies

If, as Cixous and Djébar painstakingly demonstrate, representations have successfully appropriated women's body and, as a result, her sexuality, then how can the authors formulate a liberating strategy that includes women's bodies? After for these two writers, the question of how to write about women's bodies without duplicating oppressive strategies is primordial, for silence on this subject would only serve to confirm the association of women with absence. Their writing shares, additionally, a belief in linguistic/literary possibilities: in other words, the capacity to not only deconstruct damaging images but also the potential of such a gesture to enable a liberating process. Therefore, if the authorial "I" has traditionally been male, just as the defining gaze, then the authors must consider the position(s) from which they write: this is important, because as writers they appear to occupy a traditionally male vantage-point, and as women writers they wish to wield this position to write about women without reproducing appropriating gestures. Djébar and Cixous employ thus their unique positions at the vanguard of a new kind of writing, informed by the experience of the border subject, to elaborate the authorial voices of a seer.

If the appropriation of women's bodies has come about through men's access to the production of representations, then for a woman writer the first step of a viable liberating writing strategy consists of the annexation and re-definition of the seer position. John Berger's claims in his influential *Ways of Seeing* (1978) that 'seeing comes before words (...) there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the world'.¹⁸ For the writer, who is also a border subject, to survive

¹⁸ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC, 1978), 7.

involves devising a set of shifting relations to the present, including the textual, historical, the other(s) and so on. In order to produce representations, then, the author must choose how to see and in which directions to look. As a result, Djébar positions herself as the writer who gazes backwards through the historical and personal, while Cixous chooses the vantage point of a prophetess. At the same time, these positions are ones of flux, for the authors recognize the importance of re-valuing history, but also the allure of re-creating an oppressive narrative, and thus they strive to avoid a rigid, dogmatic viewpoint that freezes its object in a frame; hence, Cixous's emphatic rejection of "theory" as a description of *écriture féminine*, even as she underlines the political dimension. Situated as they are, between the past and the future, conscious of both, the authors' adopt vantage points in shifting locations within a "Borderland"--a location between cultures, languages, identities, time and space from which they can represent women's bodies otherwise, from inside and out, without inflicting on their subject paralysis, subjugation or silence.

Looking back at 'Le Rire de la méduse', now almost twenty-five years old, it can be difficult to identify with its ebullient, even extravagant tone. It can be even harder to align it with Cixous's slightly exasperated description--almost certainly a response to the critical reception: 'Le Rire de la méduse' is 'un effort conscient, pédagogique, didactique pour classer, pour ordonner certaines réflexions, pour souligner un minimum de sens. De bon sens'.¹⁹ The voice of the essay, the 'je' referred to as 'je-femme', which signals the subversion of masculine language the essay enacts and describes, is that of a visionary or a prophetess, who gazes both backwards and forwards. 'Je-femme' notes the existence of the 'effets du passé', but refuses to catalogue the ways female sexuality has been repressed: 'Je ne nie pas que les effets du passé sont encore là. Mais je me refuse à les consolider en les répétant...'(RM 39): the power of these mechanisms is such that merely to repeat them

¹⁹ Mireille Calle-Gruber and Hélène Cixous, 'On Est Déjà Dans la Gueule du livre entre tiens', *Hélène Cixous, Photos de Racines* (Paris: des femmes, 1994), 15.

could consolidate and strengthen them, and therefore, the central preoccupation of the essay is to destroy. Unlike much feminist writing in the 1970s that demolished binary oppositions, hierarchical systems and the authority of the written "I", Cixous pushed forward with her insistence on destruction and, more importantly, the creation of a vision: 'ce que je dis a au moins deux faces et deux visées: détruire, casser; prévoir l'imprévu, projeter' (RM 39). The essay aims for the future, and the *je-femme's* role is to 'prévoir l'imprévu, projeter' (RM 39). The urgency, 'il est urgent d'anticiper' (RM 39), flows from the fact that the destruction of one set of oppressive structures might open a void for another similarly dominating system to fill. It is indeed a question, raised also by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whether feminism didn't unwittingly create a binary dynamic within Western feminism in which the Western feminist who appropriates her darker-skinned, Eastern or Southern "sister".²⁰ And yet, in this optimistic essay, filled with fervour, an escape appears possible, which perhaps in part explains the passionate reception it has incited.

In order to present the potential force of women writing their bodies, Cixous turns to myth and re-fashions its magic. Her choice of the Medusa 'whom no man shall behold and draw again, the breath of life' as a figurehead subverts one of the most persuasive images of woman as devouring and dangerous.²¹ In the myth, Perseus comes to a wedding empty-handed, and seeing the other guests arrive with gifts, offers to slay the Medusa and bring her head back as his gift. To do so, he travels through many different lands, because, in an indication of her status as border woman, no one is certain where the Medusa lives, and he only finds and kills her because of the helping hands of the gods Athena and Hermes. Clearly the Medusa has, for many centuries, cast the horrifying shadow of women's sexuality--her "eye" turns men to stone--across literature and history, until Cixous dares to

²⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'French Feminism in an International Frame', *Yale French Studies*, no. 62 (1981), 154-185.

²¹ See Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (England: Penguin Books, 1969), 143.

present this as just another image: 'Il suffit qu'on regarde la méduse en face pour la voir: et elle n'est pas mortelle. Elle est belle et elle rit' (RM 47). Once again, by enacting in her writing what she describes, Cixous suggests that it is time to demystify women's sexuality, re-claim the Medusa's magic, by questioning how writing has transformed woman. By being careful not to repeat the construction of the Medusa, a writer can see women's sexuality otherwise, and write an *écriture féminine*--one invested with the potential of challenging existing, oppressive structures.

The price for such transgressions outside the law is of course death: 'il faut payer: immédiate et sanglante mise à mort de ces éléments incontrôlables' (RM 42). A handful of poets, in extraordinary circumstances and capable of loving the other, have surpassed the limits of existing structures to write something of woman:

Parfois c'est d'ailleurs dans la cassure que cause un tremblement de terre, à l'occasion de cette mutation radicale des choses par un bouleversement matériel quand toutes les structures sont un moment désorientées, et qu'une éphémère sauvagerie balaie l'ordre, que le poète fait passer, pour un bref entretemps, de la femme.

(RM 42)

When such circumstances and poets exist, and Cixous' cites Kleist, Gide and Duras as examples, existing structures hurry to stifle such voices. Cixous aligns herself with such writers, and in 'La Venue à l'Écriture' she describes the complex system of real and imaginary interdictions (publishing houses, families, educational systems, Medusas, dark continents etc.), which obstructed her adoption and transformation of authorial vantage points. For Cixous to steal the gaze is principally to position herself as one who sees clearly into the past, and what has occurred there, but also into the future and its potential.

'Comment oeuvrer aujourd'hui en sourcière pour tant d'accents encore suspendus dans les silences du sérail d'hier?' (FA 7), asks Djébar in the preface to *Femmes d'Alger*, and like Cixous, she clearly believes sorcery necessary to spring open women's confinement. After her ten-year silence, and the filming of *La Nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua* (1979), Djébar adopted a camera-like writing position: 'This time (in *Femmes d'Alger*), I positioned myself neither as an outside observer, nor as an Algerian woman, nor as a colonised woman. I defined myself as a gaze, a way of looking upon my very own space'.²² Given the importance of the gaze--that of the colonials and of male family members--in creating the "interdit" that coats the female body and restricts women's movement, Djébar writes to 'éclairer le corps, pour aider à lever l'interdit, pour dévoiler'.²³ Her gaze, *sans* the filter of the *interdit*, also begins to turn towards herself in *Femmes d'Alger*, in a slow abandonment of the autobiographical reticence of the earlier works: Djébar agrees in an interview that Delacroix's painting *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, on the cover of *Femmes d'Alger* and discussed at length in the "Postface" 'triggered not your writing, but your reading of yourself; a backward gaze as it were, on what you had done; a gaze that positioned you with regard to him, the Westerner, and with regards to your work, the world of women'.²⁴ As a result, amongst the short stories is her grandmother's resolute rejection of standard gender roles as well as a peasant woman's life journey from a forced marriage via escape and prostitution to water carrier. Underlying the re-viewing of such stories, which span class divisions, is a belief in the importance of remembering the past, both official and personal versions.

If Cixous's transgressors risk death when writing about women, then for Djébar the assumption of the traditionally male vantage-point of "writer", even once transformed, also

²² Djébar, 'Woman's Memory', 173.

²³ Djébar, 'Le Risque d'écrire', *Mises en Scène d'écrivains: Assia Djébar, Nicole Brossard, Madeleine Gagnon, France Théoret*. Edited by Nicole Brossard. (Quebec: Editions le Griffon d'arguile, 1993), 75.

²⁴ Djébar, 'Woman's Memory', 175.

entails a de-stabilising journey beyond the familiar. Djébar describes writing as a defiance of a taboo, omnipresent in her mother's upbringing, which was 'one, never talk about yourself; and two, if you must, always do it "anonymously"'.²⁵ To take the step towards writing, and then towards autobiography in French, lands Djébar in the *entredoux* between languages and cultures. As Laurence Huughe claims, by breaking this taboo 'a woman writer agrees to become the target of voyeurs since she occupies the traditional male vantage point'.²⁶ This Djébar clearly recognizes: 'L'écriture est dévoilement, en public, devant des voyeurs qui ricanent'.²⁷ If her intention was to turn a camera-like gaze upon her own space, then one of the consequences was the exhibition of herself to voyeurs, for to challenge the totalising gaze of those who create representations is not to enjoy their protection.

Despite the risks inherent in subverting the traditionally male vantage point of the writer, there are certain pleasures, as a scene from Djébar's film *La Nouba des femmes de mont Chenoua* demonstrates. In this scene, Djébar films a group of elderly bearded men leaning against a wall. The men shout and gesture angrily at the camerawoman, furious at being filmed by a woman. Turning the camera, a kind of eye, back on "those who look" gleefully underscores Djébar's adoption of a vantage point--one that potentially reveals much about men. In a similar manner, the language of 'Le Rire de la méduse' serves to make the point that looking at "l'homme" may reveal there is little to fear and more to pity: for instance 'on a fait à l'homme ce grotesque et, songes-y, peu enviable destin, d'être réduit à une seule idole aux couilles d'argile' (RM 46, 47). Stealing and then transforming the traditionally male vantage point also empowers the thief.

²⁵ Ibid., 172.

²⁶ Laurence Huughe, "Ecrire comme un voile": The Problematics of the Gaze in the Work of Assia Djébar', *World Literature Today* 70, no.4 (Autumn 1996), 867.

²⁷ Djébar, *L'Amour, la fantasia* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 204.

In many ways, Djébar and Cixous come to remarkably similar conclusions, despite the different intercessors that enable them first to see and second to signal the importance of appropriating the positions of seer. For Cixous it is both language--images, metaphors, feminine and masculine nouns--and cultural associations--myth and literature--that one must demolish in order to erect new linguistic, literary and mythological panoramas inclusive of women's sexuality: 'Je veux voir: tout . . . J'ai peut-être écrit pour voir; pour avoir ce que je n'aurais jamais eu'.²⁸ The hunger to see--to stare the Medusa down--and to steal what the woman was not supposed to have (writing) entails a potentially radical subversion of oppressive structures. Djébar's film-making provided her with the impetus to write in a manner, much inspired by the cinema, that saw women without the poisoned tunic of the *interdit*. The danger for both authors is, of course, that if she is able to write, then she might lose her position as a border-subject, able to concoct in her writing and readings a *métissage* that nonetheless respects and maintains the distinctiveness of the other. Conscious of such pitfalls, the authors steal the gaze in order to position themselves as seers whose eyes pierce the many layers of cultural-sociological myths surrounding women's bodies--a daring, costly transgression of boundaries.

'Only the voice remains'

To listen becomes equally as important as to see, in particular for a border subject with her increased sensitivity to the differences in languages and voices: between French/Arabic for Djébar or French/German for Cixous but also between women's voices and men's. For the authorial border subject re-designing a vantage point involves a consideration of the relationship between writing and speech in order to enable the inclusion of formerly

²⁸ Cixous, 'La Venue', 12.

unheard voices. If language is 'the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated',²⁹ then voice remains as intimate, transient, elusive, and at times, such as in song, viscerally moving; voice also breaks the rules that govern, for example, grammar and syntax. The authors believe, therefore, that voice is close to women's body, and one of *écriture féminine's* primary characteristics is proximity to voice, which re-enforces the important link to the body, especially the mother's. For this reason in *Femmes d'Alger*, Djébar intends both to listen to women's voices and 'to explore the relationship between the written word and the voice--particularly woman's voice'.³⁰ Thus language is re-crafted from the optic of voice, which becomes the vehicle that enables the authors to include women's bodies, erotic and/or maternal, in their writing.

The authors are confronted, however, with the issue of how to transform voice and retain its close relationship to the body within writing, when speech and writing are traditionally opposed. Thus Cixous intentionally alternates between 'écrire' and 'parler' in an attempt to destabilize the binary opposition of speech/writing.³¹ For example, the first sentence of 'Le Rire de la méduse', 'Je parlerai de l'écriture féminine: *de ce qu'elle fera*' (Italics in text, RM 39), is noteworthy because Cixous is actually *writing* about women's writing, and we are reading not hearing her. The effect of her opening sentence is to make Cixous present and the essay "speak to" the reader: it also accentuates the prophetic aspect. A few paragraphs down, Cixous writes 'J'écris ceci en tant que femme vers les femmes' (RM 39): such a phrase demonstrates the authors' alternation between the individual and a community ('femme', 'les femmes'). With its frequent word play and rhythmic passages, 'Le Rire de la méduse' benefits, moreover, from being read out loud, a stylistic tendency shared by authors such as Samuel Beckett and James Joyce: for example, Cixous's cadenced 'Nous, les précoces, nous les refoulées de la culture, les belles bouches barrées de bâillons, pollen,

²⁹ Terence Hawkes, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 9.

³⁰ Djébar, 'Woman's Memory', 177.

³¹ Morag Shiach, *A Politics of Writing* (London, Routledge, 1991), 22.

haleines coupées, nous les labyrinthes, les échelles, les espaces foulés' (RM 41).³² The alternation between the verbs 'parler' and 'écrire', from one woman to many and the play on musicality in language reveals a desire to retain the links to voice and the immediacy of its effects upon the listener.

Feminine language resonates with song because of its links to the mother's voice: 'Dans la parole féminine comme dans l'écriture ne cesse jamais de résonner (...) le *chant*, la première musique, celle de la première voix d'amour, que toute femme préserve vivante' (RM 44). As a result, feminine writing doesn't contain 'cette coupure', between 'la logique du discours oral et la logique du texte' (RM 44) present in masculine writing. Cixous shifts between speaking to different audiences--she speaks both to an individual ('toi') and a collective entity (the public, men and women)--, and such movement from the specific to the general dismantles any divisions between the individual and the public. Additionally, she urges women to glide through different registers, from oral to written, and ultimately, to aural: 'Ecris-toi: il faut que ton corps se fasse entendre' (RM 43). This sentence suggests that woman's body passes through voice to the listeners. By alternating between the intimacy of spoken language that generally addresses one or a few people to the impersonality of written language, aimed at a general public, Cixous demonstrates a speaking/writing practice without distinctions and that includes the traces of voice.

Cixous underlines the importance of women speaking or writing in public, because she believes--a belief shared by Djébar--the opposite of voice to be silence and invisibility. The description of a woman speaking in public implies firstly that women are perceived more as body than speaker when speaking; and secondly, women's bodies emerge in their discourse, making it specific and local.

³² Cixous's doctoral dissertation was on James Joyce. See Cixous, *L'Exil de James Joyce ou l'art du remplacement* (Paris: Grasset, 1968).

elle ne "parle" pas, elle lance dans l'air son corps tremblant, elle se lâche, elle vole, c'est tout entière qu'elle passe dans sa voix, c'est avec son corps qu'elle soutient vitalemt la "logique" de son discours: sa chair dit vrai.

(Italics in text, RM 43-44)

As Shiach has rightly noted, Cixous believes that a woman speaking necessarily transgresses, since 'their bodies cannot be erased from their speech as they have been from their writing'.³³ Crafting a language that depends for its effects on voice enables the inclusion of women's body in both speech and writing.

The Djebarian approach to voice, and its role in writing, may be qualified as more cautious than the Cixousian one. Djebar principally listens to the voices of others in order to transcribe their language/bodies, and retain the veiled quality--in a marked contrast to Cixous's proclamation in 'Le Rire de la méduse' that women must seize *la parole*. Thus *Femmes d'Alger* is 'quelques repères sur un trajet d'écoute', for as Djebar signals, '*J'aurais pu écouter ces voix dans n'importe quelle langue non écrite, non enregistrée*', and moreover, she introduces the collection as '*voici donc une écoute*' (Italics in text, FA 7). Bearing the bruises of confronting societal taboos, and painfully aware that writing about other women, especially in French, is a violation, Djebar moves forward with care; for her subject (Algerian women), which is also herself, must be gently approached. Djebar transcribes her subjects, who have been, for centuries, the object of prying gazes, by listening to their voices. In this process, she discovers that women's voices are veiled; in other words, these women do not speak of themselves or their bodies: '*Mots du corps voilé, langage à son tour qui si longtemps a pris le voile*' (Italics in text, FA 7). The body, its enclosure and the restrictions on its movement, thus clearly mediates women's relationship to language.

³³ Shiach, *A Politics*, 22.

Djebar's writing proceeds with the awareness of the *interdit* surrounding women--the physical and mental harems--, and she penetrates this enclosure, because of her privileged position as a border subject--both "one of us" and "one of them". Djebar believes one way to instigate a concrete liberation of those whose movements, and perhaps minds, are restricted is to transcribe their voices. At the same time, as Huughe argues, Djebar remains wary of speech that enlightens, and therefore, crafts a language that includes the veil as "of a body" with Algerian women.³⁴ In this way, Djebar writes like a veil, close to the bodies of her subjects: '*Ne pas prétendre "parler pour" ou pis "parler sur" à peine parler près de, et si possible tout contre*' (Italics in text, FA 4). As one of the '*quelques femmes arabes qui obtiennent ou acquièrent la liberté de mouvement, du corps et de l'esprit*', Djebar is in a position to exploit the border subject position, and she also feels it is her responsibility--the '*première des solidarités à assumer*' (Italics in text, FA 4). At the same time, she refuses to replicate the dynamics of concealment and exposure that underlies the perception of women in Algeria. Her solidarity is evidenced in a two-pronged strategy: first, to 'parler près de', which means Djebar as author maintains a distant, non-interfering but empathetic observer-like position, similar to the camera's eye. Her writing also remains close to women's body. Second, in the 'Postface' and 'Ouverture' she speaks "tout contre" the cultural-societal *interdit* and well-meaning, but assimilating writing practices without forgetting that her writing also trespasses: '*Depuis dix ans au moins (...) je ressens combien parler sur ce terrain devient (sauf pour les porte-parole et les "spécialistes") d'une façon ou d'une autre une transgression*' (Italics in text, FA 8).

The importance of voice resonates within the short stories, notably in 'Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement', and here conversations between Frenchwomen and Algerian ones as well as amongst Algerian women becomes a privileged trope.³⁵ In 'Femmes d'Alger', Anne, the daughter of European settlers, returns to Algiers after a failed marriage, and her

³⁴ Huughe, "Ecrire comme un voile", 867.

³⁵ The short story 'Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement' will be referred to as 'Femmes d'Alger'.

mental balance is precarious. When Sarah, an Algerian school friend of Anne, describes the unheard voices of 'les femmes arabes' who one day will liberate the city, her audience is Anne:

--Je ne vois pour les femmes arabes qu'un seul moyen de tout débloquent: parler, parler sans cesse d'hier et d'aujourd'hui, parler entre nous, dans tous les gynécées, les traditionnels et ceux des H.L.M. Parler entre nous et regarder. Regarder dehors, regarder hors des murs et des prisons!...La femme-regard et la femme-voix, ajouta-t-elle assez obscurément, puis elle ricana:
--Pas la voix des cantatrices qu'ils emprisonnent dans leurs mélodies sucrées!...La voix qu'ils n'ont jamais entendue, parce qu'il se passera bien des choses inconnues et nouvelles avant qu'elle puisse chanter: la voix des soupirs, des rancunes, des douleurs de toutes celles qu'ils ont emmurées...La voix qui cherche dans les tombeaux ouverts!

Sarah rêva à ces générations de femmes. (FA 60)

Sarah warns against considering the 'cantatrices' as representative of Algerian women's voices, and throughout 'Femmes d'Alger' it is the lament of a Jewish singer that unfolds in a hauntingly sad song. By speaking to a Frenchwoman about the unheard voices of Arab women, Sarah looks 'dehors'; moreover, she simultaneously includes and excludes Anne. On the one hand, Anne cannot partake in these conversations 'dans tous les gynécées' and 'H.L.M'; and on the other hand, Anne plays the role of the outsider, and a representative of the former colonial power, who now serves as a witness, and perhaps, through listening as a potential enabler.

At the same time, a shift in the traditional power relations between Algerian and French women occurs here, for earlier in the short story, Sarah comes to the aid of Anne who botches a suicide attempt. In an interview, Djébar refers to this scene below:

It is the Algerian woman who comes to the help of the French one, whereas this was a period when we'd hear, all day long, that "the feminists from the West," as they were reverently called, had something crucial to give us, Moslem women, a lesson to teach us, ready-made recipes that would save us.³⁶

As Djébar suggests in the above excerpt from an interview, the scene between Sarah and Anne is meant to signal to Western feminists that the time has come for them to listen to Algerian women. Indeed, some twelve years after the publication of *Femmes d'Alger*, in an unpublished interview Djébar ventured that 'among my books, (*Femmes d'Alger* is) the one most in dialogue with (French feminism)' -- the scene between Anne and Sarah is a *mise-en-abîme* for this dialogue.³⁷ Critics consistently ignore the relationship between Djébar's text and "French feminism"-- even when the occasion was propitious such as the issue of *Yale French Studies* dedicated to "French feminism" that included two articles each on or by Cixous and Djébar.³⁸ Zimra's article in this issue implicitly opposes the authors as occupying different sides of the "First-World"/"Third-World" divide: she discusses the reading strategies of *Femmes d'Alger* and *L'Amour, la fantasia*, makes a brief reference to Cixous, and ends with the forceful claim that Djébar does not necessarily believe in a 'bio-essentialist fallacy "made in Paris"'.

Clearly Djébar has misgivings about Frenchwomen's, or Western women's, ignorance of the other and sees this as an obstacle to intra-cultural exchange: for example, when Anne notices the long, bluish scar along Sarah's abdomen, she naively asks, 'Une brûlure? . . . Sarah ne répondit pas . . . Anne ignorait tout de la ville au cours de la période passée de feu et de meurtres' (FA 43). Inter-Algerian women's communication is portrayed, however,

³⁶ Djébar, 'Woman's Memory', 177.

³⁷ Djébar, unpublished interview by Clarisse Zimra, quoted by Zimra in 'Disorienting the Subject in Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*', *Yale French Studies: Special Issue Another Look, Another Woman: Retranslations of French Feminism*, no. 87 (1996), 151.

³⁸ See *Yale French Studies Another Look, Another Woman: Retranslations of French Feminism*, no. 87 (1995); Djébar, 'Assia Djébar', interview with David Coward, videocassette, Leeds: Leeds University, Media Service, 2001.

as equally fraught with omissions but has the body as a shared medium. Leila, 'condamnée à mort à vingt ans' during the French-Algerian war and who languishes, in the present, in a drugged stupor, watches as Sarah undoes her corsage to show her torture scars. Sarah sighs, 'J'ai toujours eu des problèmes avec les mots!' (FA 55). Language fails Sarah, because her pain (from torture and imprisonment) has been silenced twofold. Society has "forgotten" the war scars written on women's bodies, despite the trials in which these were minutely exhibited, and as a consequence, women similar to Sarah have internalised this silence. Once Leila sees the scar, Sarah 'aurait voulu se mettre à lui lécher la face et pleurer ainsi sur elle, écraser de violences chaleureuses ce corps décharné' (FA 55). As this scene exemplifies, when the voice fails, the women in these short stories have recourse to the body, and in particular, to the homoerotic, suggested by the desire to lick the other's face. By showing her body, in particular her scars to Leila, Sarah begins the process of overcoming her silence: 'elle chercha en sourde-muette des mots d'amour, mots informels, en quelle langue trouver les mots, comme des grottes ou des tourbillons de tendresse' (FA 55). Grief, both individual and collective, is released by the act of one Algerian woman showing her mutilated body and another gazing upon it. In this moving scene, the characters are in a pre-verbal state in which the body replaces the voice.

Djebar's films and novels are attempts to recuperate women's voices, restore sound to women, and ensure their access to movement, influence and subsequent liberation.

Je ne vois que dans les bribes de murmures anciens comment
chercher à restituer la conversation entre femmes, celle-là même
que Delacroix gelait sur le tableau. Je n'espère que dans la porte
ouverte en plein soleil, celle que Picasso ensuite a imposée, une
libération concrète et quotidienne des femmes.

(FA 164)

The naked women--'nu' in the Algerian dialect of Arabic means a woman without a veil--in Picasso's works clearly circulate, and with generous gestures, in outside space. And yet, Djébar's use of Picasso as an intercessor, however symbolic, who enables women's access to freedom of movement appears problematic, given his portrayal in other works of women as disfigured, mutilated and weeping. Here Djébar also writes 'des femmes'--the name of her publisher--without specifying Arabic or Algerian women, which perhaps indirectly suggests that her project, with or without Picasso's door, could have wider application. For Djébar, the liberation of Algerian women, who remain enclosed in the *interdit* with their voices muffled, necessarily involves the excavation of women's unheard voices--the 'murmures anciens' today inaudible in the streets of Algiers and absent from the collective consciousness.

Voice becomes then what remains when the woman's body is invisible, whether through mis-representation or enclosure--spiritual and physical--, and therefore, it becomes a means to re-access the corporal, including women's desire, pain, and movement. Clearly then for Cixous and Djébar as border subjects, voice becomes a facilitator that enables them to include women's body in a new kind of language, and simultaneously, subvert the structures designed to exclude it, which are perpetuated by language. For Cixous a re-visioning of language, which becomes *écriture féminine*, implies privileging a writing practice in which speaking and voice are a potential means of destabilizing the binary opposition between speech and writing. Djébar focuses on listening, instead of speaking, and she suggests the benefits of intra and inter-cultural dialogue between women, in the present and in the past. Her short stories put women of different nationalities and classes into dialogue in order to demonstrate the potentially liberating benefits of speaking and listening to one another; however, she is careful to retain a 'language like a veil' that does not overexpose its subject. One of the meaningful effects of writing in a manner inclusive

and representative of voice(s) is to create a space for women's bodies--such a space will enable a concrete liberation of women from mis-representation, and ultimately, different kinds of oppression.

The Maternal body: symbol, vessel, and cipher

Writing about women's bodies, even with the inclusion of voice, can easily backfire: the writer runs the risk of duplicating, however unwittingly, man's appropriating gesture. As a result, women's body is a contentious, dividing subject in feminist discourse, and perhaps no body is more vulnerable to appropriation or more problematic than the maternal one. The pregnant female body destabilises, splits or doubles the self. The relationship to the mother and the maternal body are recurring themes in women's writing: how to write about the mother, to kill her or to embrace her are persistent questions. 'Le Rire de la méduse' and *Femmes d'Alger* also address this central theme in relation to the border subject, but this is an area in which the authors significantly differ in their approach: Djébar ambivalently distances herself from the procreating body but nonetheless claims the mother as a symbol, while Cixous emphatically situates the maternal body as source and fabric of *écriture féminine*.

'Le Rire de la méduse' first appeared in an issue of *L'Arc* devoted to the "mother" of feminism in France, Simone de Beauvoir but does not name her once. In a radical departure from, even a rejection of, Beauvoir, Cixous concretely proposes that women reconsider pregnancy, the image of the pregnant body and what it means to have a child. She argues, firstly, that the desire to have a child does not equal a desire for a penis: 'dans l'enfant ce n'est pas le pénis que la femme désire'; secondly having a child is not necessarily to slip into 'schémas' or 'le circuit de la reproduction' (RM 51). Women can, therefore, avoid the replication of "the family" in which Oedipal dramas unfold. According to

Cixous, it is possible to escape such stories, 'Défétichissons. Sortons de la dialectique qui veut que le bon père soit le père mort, ou l'enfant la mort des parents' (RM 52). The alternative Cixous proposes is to view the child as an other, 'mais l'autre sans violence, sans passage par la perte, la lutte' (RM 52), suggesting that to have a child is, like the act of writing, to 'ajouter à la vie générale un autre' (RM 52). The systematic repression of pregnancy, 'toujours d'ailleurs dramatisée ou escamotée ou maudite' (RM 52), in society, at different times, hints at the power invested in the procreating body:

Car s'il y a un refoulé particulier, c'est bien là qu'on le trouve: tabou de la femme enceinte, qui en dit long sur la puissance dont elle paraît alors investie; c'est qu'on soupçonne depuis toujours qu'enceinte, la femme non seulement double sa valeur marchande, mais aussi *se valorise* en tant que *femme* à ses propres yeux, et prend corps et sexe indéniablement.

(Italics in text, RM 52)

Whilst reversing the view, born from a fear of the procreating body, that pregnancy and motherhood necessarily oppresses women or condemns them to live out Oedipal dramas, Cixous also associates the procreating body with writing: 'la pulsion de gestation; -- tout comme l'envie d'écrire: une envie de se vivre dedans, une envie du ventre, de la langue, du sang' (RM 52). As the daughter of a midwife, it is perhaps unsurprising that she consistently uses giving birth as a metaphor for writing. For instance, in 'La Venue à l'écriture' she writes: 'J'accouche. J'aime accoucher. J'aimais les accouchements--Ma mère est sage-femme--J'ai toujours pris plaisir à voir une femme accoucher'.³⁹ To have a child and to write stems from a similar desire to experience the body.

³⁹ Cixous, 'La Venue', 40.

A crucial element of *écriture féminine* is the daughter's closeness to the 'rhythms and articulations' of the mother's body, and a willingness 'to enable and sing the other' capable of transforming, hierarchical binary structures.⁴⁰

Même si la mystification phallique a contaminé généralement les bons rapports, la femme n'est jamais loin de la "mère" (que j'entends hors-rôle, la "mère" comme non-nom, et comme source des biens). Toujours en elle subsiste au moins un peu du bon lait-de-mère. Elle écrit à l'encre blanche.

(RM 44)

Women's present proximity to the maternal body enables them potentially to destabilize existing structures and systems, especially if they write in such a way as to allow the maternal body to emerge. Cixous writes: 'Dans la femme, il y a toujours plus ou moins de la mère qui répare et alimente, et résiste à la séparation, une force qui ne se laisse pas couper, mais qui essouffle les codes' (RM 44). Women's proximity to the maternal body and her ability to incorporate it into writing contains, therefore, the potential to transform existing systems: 'Parce que son "économie pulsionnelle" est prodigue, elle ne peut pas en *prenant* la parole, ne pas transformer directement et indirectement *tous* les systèmes d'échanges fondés sur l'épargne masculine' (RM 44).

Cixous's position with regard to the maternal body, one of the distinguishing characteristics of her writing, is oft discussed, and fraught with difficulties. Her use of the maternal or the procreating body as metaphors for writing, which Donna Stanton refers to as 'a religious impulse', raises the larger issue of Cixous's metaphors--are metaphors consistent with a stance predicated on difference given that metaphors are binary?⁴¹

⁴⁰ See Sellers, *Authorship*, 7-10.

⁴¹ Donna Stanton, 'Difference on Trial' in *Poetics of Gender*, ed. Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 168.

Stanton in the well-argued 'Difference on Trial' points to the mother/daughter bond as the privileged metaphor for 'femininity in writing'.⁴² Cixous's use of metaphors, such as the mother-daughter bond and the maternal body to illustrate her writing practice, is a technique she upholds as desirable and effective but one that seems to constrain Cixous to binary oppositions between, for example, writers who write close to the mother and those who do not. This repeats, therefore, the very binary structures that Cixous seeks to dismantle.⁴³ Stanton also argues that to stress differences, especially the ability to procreate, between women's bodies and men's can result, moreover, in a dangerous confirmation of the beliefs that equates women with biology.

The worries are real, according to Shiach, because 'writing of the body, we fear appropriation at the point where, historically, we have been most vulnerable, and where we have been so ruthlessly placed'.⁴⁴ As she argues in response to Stanton, this is truly a double bind for feminism: on the one hand, to avoid or ignore the bodily, and especially the maternal body, repeats patterns of oppression that have traditionally reduced women to their bodies; and on the other hand, to speak/write about the body risks the same effect. Shiach finds 'no answer, at least not within the political discourse of feminism' to this dilemma.⁴⁵ With this in mind, it seems important to return to an earlier point that 'Le Rire de la méduse' is principally a *potential* liberating strategy.

Djebar takes a position opposite to Cixous's by considering the procreating body with distrust, if not distaste, and the mother with ambivalence, for in her Algerian landscape the mother's body replaces the erotic one. In Djebar's fictional works, women are rarely portrayed as mothers: as she underlines 'my women have no children', and when evoked pregnancy is a vegetative state.⁴⁶ For example, in *Les Impatients*, the main character, Dalila,

⁴² Ibid., 169.

⁴³ Ibid., 161-174.

⁴⁴ Shiach, *A Politics*, 20.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁶ Djebar, 'Woman's Memory', 176.

scathingly describes her pregnant aunt: 'Les femmes de chez nous, quand elles sont grosses, semblent pénétrer dans un univers laiteux où elles se savourent seules'.⁴⁷ Zineb, the aunt here described, loses her baby: moreover, an abortion and miscarriage appear respectively in *La Soif* and *Ombre Sultane*. Djébar's ambivalence towards the procreating body, as evidenced in these examples, stems from her analysis of the role the mother plays in society: 'la présence agrandie de la mère (femme sans corps ou au contraire au corps multiplié) se trouve être le noeud le plus solide d'une incommunicabilité quasi totale des sexes' (FA 160): either the maternal body is absent or multiple and suffocating. At the same time, Djébar states that the mother 'semble avoir monopolisé en fait la seule expression authentique d'une identité culturelle' (FA 160). The mother obstructs relationships between men and women because her body—the only female body visible—is never portrayed as an erotic one but rather as a suffering or sacred one. Her restricted movement limits the transmission of women's voices outside her enclosure.

As a result, the mother, in the Djébarian universe, clearly excludes the procreating female body: 'when I think of the female body, I do not see it as a procreating body but as an erotic body'.⁴⁸ Understandably, Djébar appears reluctant to forefront pregnancy or the pregnant body, in particular, since childbearing has been used as an excuse to limit women's influence or movement. In *Femmes d'Alger*, Djébar points to the mother as an agent in the effacement of women's body--this mother who 'nous masquait son corps, afin de revenir comme voix d'aïeule indéfinie, chœur intemporel où se redit l'histoire. Mais une histoire dont s'expulse l'image archétypale du corps féminin' (FA 160). These voices, without the disturbing erotic bodies, take the forms of songs, quatrains, funerary laments, lamentos and so on: 'Son de la mère qui, femme sans corps et sans voix individuelle, retrouve le timbre de la voix collective et obscure, nécessairement asexuée' (FA 160).

⁴⁷ Djébar, *Les Impatients* (Paris: Julliard, 1958), 86.

⁴⁸ Djébar, 'Woman's Memory', 177.

Despite the erasure of the erotic body from the mother's voice, her songs or whispers transmit an authentic cultural identity, a 'mémoire affective' (FA 160), endangered by an encroaching silence due to women's increased bitterness in a world in which 'le son est vraiment coupé', and which no longer resounds with 'chuchotements de tendresse complice, de plaintes perdues, bref d'un romantisme d'enchantement évanoui' (FA 161). In *Femmes d'Alger*, Djébar tries to restore sound, that is to say erotic experience--a daring process begun in *Les Alouettes naïves* with its lyrical passages describing a woman's sexual pleasure.

In the later essay, 'Anamnèse', Djébar further develops the idea of the mother as a symbolic figure, by describing a female tradition in which women "bury" their mothers in their memories, in order to transgress farther than the women before them.⁴⁹ In one instance, the death of Djébar's mother's beloved sister resulted in the mother's yearlong loss of voice. In later years, Djébar's mother removed her veil, donned chic European clothing and crisscrossed France to visit her imprisoned son: the ability to cross societal boundaries evidenced in her mother's trips by boat, train and bus grew, according to Djébar, from her mother's loss of voice upon the death of her favourite sister. In a similar manner, what Djébar attempts as a writer, in particular in *Vaste est la Prison*, is to excavate both the circumstances of how women lost their voices as well as the women behind such losses, who are often buried in memory: 'Ecrire, retour au corps, tout au moins à la main mobile'.⁵⁰ She portrays a temporary loss of voice as a gestation period, a rebellion against some pain, such as the loss of a sister, which later allows the once voiceless to gather the strength necessary to trespass across the boundaries of acceptable behaviour.

One of the key differences in the authors' elaboration of liberation strategies is their stance towards the maternal body, and this is an aspect of their writing practices that they

⁴⁹ Djébar, 'Anamnèse', *Ces Voix qui m'assiègent: . . . en marge de ma francophonie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), 138-150.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

continue to develop. In Cixous's oeuvre the maternal body is source and fabric of *écriture féminine*-- inseparable from voice. And yet, Cixous's extensive use of the maternal body and the mother-daughter bond as metaphors for feminine writing recreates the dichotomy of "women as that which is not man"--a difficulty to which there is perhaps no answer in present feminist debates. Djébar's position shifts from a profound ambivalence towards the maternal body--a body that she uneasily recognises as forming an important part of women's experience--to the privileging of the mother as memory. At the same time, her telling the stories of how women transgressed societal boundaries suggests a mother-daughter link: the unearthing of these stories, and their writing, enables other women's liberation. The inclusion of the mother and the maternal body raises many unresolved questions and issues that disrupt the coherence of the authors' thinking: at the same time, along this fault line, a willingness to engage with the mother and the maternal body emerges despite the associated risks.

The Border subject's language

Up to this point, I have discussed three aspects--the seer, the voice and the mother--present in 'Le Rire de la méduse' and *Femmes d'Alger* that form the building blocks for the inclusion of women's bodies in alternative representations within the authors' writing. These texts represent important turning points, because of Cixous's and Djébar's embrace of authorial positions, which then becomes the motor for their liberating projects and its alternative vantage, listening and speaking points. The narrative subject present in the early texts, namely *Les Impatients* and *Dedans*, drew upon historical and cultural realities but retained a strong link to the fictional. With the appearance of *Femmes d'Alger* and 'Le Rire de la méduse', the authors assumed the ambiguous cultural, linguistic, and spatial positioning

of their biographies, and transformed this *métissage* into writing voices that, to differing degrees, confidently predicted concrete changes for women. Simultaneously, the semi-autobiographical began to interrupt the political and/or fictional: its reverberations continue in the authors' following works. Cixous's and Djébar's relationship to the fabric of writing, language generally and French specifically, and their understanding of its potential, constitutes the heart of their writing projects--unsurprising given the interplay of languages that shaped their childhoods.

Why is language a determining factor for the authorial border subject? To address this question, it is important to signal the lasting, if different impact of colonialism on Cixous and Djébar, which they first begin to come to terms with in an explicit manner in *Femmes d'Alger* and 'Le Rire de la méduse'--a process continued in later works. Eric Cheyfitz argues that mastering the master's language intensifies alienation, because the native speaker is thus separated from her community and her self.⁵¹ Amply evidenced in Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*, woman's body as source and material of writing compounds this alienation:

Mais lorsque femme et écriture, malgré toutes les barrières, se rencontrent, lorsque femme analphabète se sert de son propre corps pour écrire--et écrire quoi sinon son propre étouffement, la crête de son asphyxie--on considère alors que ce langage n'est que cris sinon du dérisoire ou du tragique, du moins du malséant et de l'inévitable.⁵²

In this passage from 'Le Risque d'écrire', which could easily be mistaken for a piece by Cixous, Djébar points to the disdainful reception of women's writing--a further destabilizing event for the authorial border subject--a woman gifted, after all, with the

⁵¹ Eric Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 126.

⁵² Djébar, 'Le Risque', 8.

ability to see, hear and write close to the *femmes analphabètes*--but whose writing appeals to deaf ears. The border subject is, moreover, also "illiterate" insofar as the language she masters (French) is doubly the master's language--the father's and the colonizer's--, and to write, she must transform it by inserting, at the risk of derision, her own body. The transformation of French--through the writing of cloistered women's sighs, transliterations from Arabic, the inclusion of rhythmical writing and subversive word play--becomes a risky *tangage-language* between multiple selves, languages, and cultures, which perhaps only the authorial border subject can pull off.

The originality of 'Le Rire de la méduse' resides not so much in its claim that language is both a physical function and a theoretical system or structure, but in Cixous's enactment of how women can use language to write their bodies. To deflect the point that language is inaccessible, Cixous points out that women, especially those too terrified to speak, do know their "langue"--a play on the double meaning of "langue" in French: 'Celle qui a tourné dix mille fois sept fois sa langue dans sa bouche avant de ne pas parler, ou elle en est morte, ou elle connaît sa langue et sa bouche mieux que tous' (RM 48). As a result of their silence, women are more aware of their bodies and by implication their sexuality than men who pay scant attention to their own sexuality. Although men have had the luxury to write about their sexuality, they have not done so: 'Ils ont encore tout à dire, les hommes, sur leur sexualité, et tout à écrire' (RM 40). As a result, women are uniquely situated to invent a new language that incorporates women's sexual experience: 'Il faut que la femme écrive par son corps, qu'elle invente la langue imprenable qui crève les cloisonnements, classes et rhétoriques, ordonnances et codes' (RM 48). Such languages would subvert all existing systems and structures: 'Maintenant, je-femme vais faire sauter la Loi: éclatement désormais possible, et inéluctable; et qu'il se fasse, tout de suite, *dans la langue*' (Italics in text, RM 48). The individual woman's gesture of exploding the Law, repeated by many women in

different ways, would, therefore, result in a collective movement leading to change. And yet, the optimism of this essay appears, with hindsight, somewhat dated; additionally, some of Cixous's own fictional texts do not appear to meet the promise expounded in 'Le Rire de la méduse'.⁵³

In 'Le Rire de la méduse', Cixous addresses women with the clear message that they have access to language: 'il n'y a pas à craindre qu'en le langage se cache un adversaire invincible, parce que c'est la langue des hommes et leur grammaire' (RM 49). Here Cixous suggests that language can be twisted around to suit women by the explosion of 'la langue' and the insertion of 'une langue'--one of the many languages of women. Traditionally, women has been "'dans" le discours de l'homme' (RM 49), but it is now time for individual women, through the insertion of 'une langue', to displace her position as negative signifier, i.e. as absence, as man's opposite:

Il est temps qu'elle disloque ce "dans", qu'elle l'explose, le retourne et s'en saisisse, qu'elle le fasse sien, le comprenant, le prenant dans sa bouche à elle, que de ses dents à elle elle lui morde la langue, qu'elle s'invente une langue pour lui rentrer dedans.

(RM 49)

This passage stages women's seizure of language in images that evoke graphic intercourse, perhaps even rape, and exemplifies how women can appropriate the negative signifier, of which women's bodies is the most obvious and prevalent example and use it to re-enter language. At the same time, Cixous warns against succumbing to an identification with or imitation of the strategies of the male economy, by adopting 'leurs instruments, leurs concepts, leurs places' or 'de se vouloir dans leur position de maîtrise' (RM 49). There is

⁵³ See Sellers, *Authorship*, 5.

clearly a fine line between subversion in the form of word play and replicating the master's effacing gesture.

Cixous juxtaposes women as singular, homogeneous with the image of women as heterogeneous: 'ce qui me frappe c'est l'infinie richesse de leurs constitutions singulières' (RM 49). 'Constitutions' suggests that women's differences are rooted in the experience of the bodily. Critics have charged that Cixous presents woman as a 'monolithic collectivity' and therefore, negates differences between, for example, First-World women and Third-World Women. Luxury is clearly an element of *écriture féminine*: an author must be able not only to write--a luxury in many parts of the world--, but also have the added privilege of writing about her self and not feel obliged, for example by political circumstances, to address pressing societal issues in order to practice an *écriture féminine*. Cixous remains, therefore, careful in stressing the multiplicity of women's experiences and stories: 'Mais il faut dire, avant tout, qu'il n'y a pas, aujourd'hui même, (..) une femme générale, une femme type' (RM 39); moreover, she describe women's situation and locations as plural: 'la femme se passe toujours simultanément en plusieurs lieux. Elle dé-pense l'histoire unifiante, ordonnatrice...' (RM 45). Precisely because woman refers to those who are able to write their own multiple, differing stories, it is difficult to sustain the argument that Cixous speaks about woman as a monolithic collectivity. The very lavishness of her prose, evidenced in her poetic descriptions and images, evokes women's heterogeneity.

What particularly distinguishes the authorial border subject is her ability to steal/fly in and with language: '*Voler*, c'est le geste de la femme, voler dans la langue, la faire voler' (RM 49); and moreover, 'la femme tient de l'oiseau et du voleur comme le voleur tient de la femme et de l'oiseau' (RM 49). She plays here on the double meaning of *voler*, stealing and flying, to suggest that women's relationship to language is inherently subversive. In later texts, she describes her relationship to French as one also marked by theft/flight--a result

of the plural languages with their different associations, which were present in her childhood: 'Je n'ai pas de langue légitime. En allemand je chante, en anglais je me déguise, en français je vole, je suis voleuse'.⁵⁴ The different relationships she entertains with languages are a result of her experience of German as her mother tongue, English as the language she studied at university, and French as her father's language as well as the fabric of her writing.

For Djébar, the links between the language question and the woman one is complicated by the fact that she writes in French, the former coloniser's language. Similar to Cixous, Djébar describes a woman who gains the freedom to write and, therefore, to circulate as a 'voleuse possible dans l'espace masculin' (FA 151); her own use of French is 'butin arraché'.⁵⁵ Djébar inflects French with unusual syntax and transliterations from the Arabic, what has been referred to as maddeningly difficult for the translator:⁵⁶ a characteristic also encountered in Cixous's prose. Both Djébar and Cixous underline their polyphonic approach with the use of italics. Zimra claims that Djébar's disruption of 'Cartesian textual order' and the French language is put to the exclusive service of 'women's justice'.⁵⁷ Indeed, Djébar's re-working of French, her disruptions of French grammar and conventions, would appear to create a space both for the stories of the women in 'Femmes d'Alger' (Sarah, Anne and Leila) as well as the jubilantly dancing, naked ones in Picasso's version of Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*--a space Djébar makes clear is unavailable, in the present, within Standard Arabic.

The greatest difference between Cixous's and Djébar's liberating projects is that Djébar's language marks her focus as the specificity of Algerian women, while Cixous's approach suggests a grander, broader intention. Critics claim universal appeal for Djébar's

⁵⁴ Cixous, 'La Venuc', 24.

⁵⁵ Djébar, 'Du Français comme butin', *Ces l'ois: qui m'assiègent... en marge de ma francophonie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), 71.

⁵⁶ Zimra, 'Afterword', *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, trans. Marjolijn de Jager (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1992), 211.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 197.

specific project, for example, 'far from being limited to the "plight of Algerian woman," this collection of short stories speaks to all of us', while Cixous is accused of being too specific and thus falsely universal.⁵⁸ The fundamental difference in the critical perception of the authors is of course affected by personal circumstances (Cixous is "French", Djébar is Algerian), but it also has a textual basis. With 'Le Rire de la méduse', Cixous had a certain audience in mind--composed of literate individuals with the luxury of writing; after all, she wrote 'Le Rire de la méduse' from the heart of Parisian feminist debates. Cixous clearly sees herself, and rightly so, as a central figure with certain responsibilities. As it transpired, her impact was greater in Anglo-American circles than in French ones. Djébar is and prefers to remain marginal to Parisian feminist debates; moreover, it is difficult to measure her centrality to such issues in Algeria, when she has so few Algerian readers. It would be absurd for Djébar, for example, to write 'Ecris-toi' to Algerian women--the vast majority of whom never read *Femmes d'Alger*, although Djébar intended the collection for an Algerian audience. Nonetheless, it is the authorial border subject position, rooted in their experience of growing up in French Algeria, which enables them to identify the necessity for a new kind of language inclusive and respectful of women.

Quickly grasping that reversing women's situation involved incorporating women's body into their liberating strategies, these authors devised writing practices--for Cixous *écriture féminine* and for Djébar 'language like a veil'-- that used the border subject's vantage points, re-thought the complex, unresolved relationship to the maternal body and allowed for writing close to and with the body. In many ways, *Femmes d'Alger* pushes the argument of 'Le Rire de la méduse' in new directions by zeroing in on the specific situation of Algerian women: its careful attention to a defined group of women proved prescient with regard to the debates of post-colonial theory, much influenced by but also reacting against

⁵⁸ Ibid., 161.

"French feminism". Precisely because of this emphasis, *Femmes d'Alger* has perhaps aged better than the more ambitious but still compelling 'Le Rire de la méduse'. If Cixous's and Djébar's writing practices differ significantly in the approaches to women's bodies, then they share a similar cause, one which may be all the more urgent today, given the ever-widening chasm between rich and poor, Muslim and Jew, the so-called First-World and Third. The modalities of Cixous's and Djébar's liberating writing practices are different, as it behoves their subjects, audiences and ambitions, but commitment to women is the underlying preoccupation that shapes not only their politics but also their dialogue with the past.

Imaginary Homelands

L'Amour, la fantasia (1985) and
Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage: scènes primitives (2000)

In their pre-1980s oeuvre, Cixous and Djébar investigated the dynamics of the border subject position in fictional and semi-theoretical works: in the previous chapter it was argued that the border subject's vantage point ultimately enabled Cixous and Djébar to develop liberating writing strategies. As a direct consequence of these strategies, which were intended primarily to further *other* women's corporal freedom, Cixous and Djébar began to examine the fabric of their lives, the import of their Algerian roots and their escape from enclosure. As the authors turned towards autobiographical material, the spiral of violence in Algeria, during the 1980s and 1990s, climbed towards its zenith. Alarmed by the drama unfolding on the Algerian scene in the present, Cixous and Djébar turned to their own past and to history. The authors' post-1980s fictional work, in particular *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage*, consistently incorporate explicit autobiographical and historical elements and might best be characterized as semi-autobiographical works--on a border between the fictional and factual.¹ These two works contain, in specific, the questioning of the border subject dynamics in relation to origin, language, belonging and home.

¹ Assia Djébar, *L'Amour, la fantasia*, (Paris: J.C. Lattés, 1985; Paris: Albin Michel, 1995); all subsequent citations are to the later edition. Hélène Cixous, *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage: scènes primitives* (Paris: Galilée, 2001). References are given in the text.

The lyrical passages of *L'Amour, la fantasia*--the first volume in an explicitly autobiographical Algerian quartet--describe incidents from Djébar's journey towards becoming a writer--in the opening, she walks to the French school on the first day of class--interwoven with historical stories from the French conquest of Algeria and the Algerian liberation, while *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage* contains the important events and feelings--the passion and the rejection--of the narrator's childhood in French colonial Algeria.² The context of colonial humiliation resulted in both the authors feeling out-of-place for different reasons: the recognition in the present of how exceptional their situations were provides the impetus for their return in writing to the past. Djébar and Cixous both focus on love scenes, because Djébar's own wedding night or Cixous's relationship to a beloved maid reveal in full the contradictions of the border subject--a narrator between languages, cultures and time. The authors write, moreover, the intimate, semi-autobiographical moments of their life in French--a language with which both authors entertain a vexed relationship. Against the background of a splintered Algeria, the authors sketch their memories not as an escape from the present but rather as a potent political re-reading and re-valuing of the past.

Impetuses

In the 1980s, Marguerite Duras published the international bestseller *L'Amant* (1984), which recounts the semi-autobiographical story of a French girl's affair with a Chinese lover in colonial Indochina: this runaway success appeared just one year before the

² The Algerian quartet consists of *L'Amour, la fantasia*, *Ombre Sultane* (Paris: J.C. Lattès, 1987) and *L'aste est la Prison* (Paris: Albin Michel 1995). The final volume, still in progress, will be about the father, see Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Assia Djébar ou la résistance de l'écriture: regards d'un écrivain d'Algérie* (Paris: Mouton & Larose, 2001), 15.

publication of Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*. Colonial settings, hopeless love stories and the past were themes clearly in vogue as the catapulting of Duras to star status revealed. With the literary furor over *L'Amant*--copies flew out of bookstores literally as fast as they were placed on the shelves--playing in the background, *L'Amour, la fantasia* did not go unnoticed: *Révolution Africaine* hailed it as the most important book of the decade, and the respected scholar Jacques Berque praised Djébar's prose as 'une sorte de latinité africaine'.³ For Djébar, the trigger to return to her childhood in colonial French Algeria through semi-autobiographical writing was the inability, some 30 years later, to determine her identity amidst her different languages and cultures:

I began to wonder about myself: Who am I? A Berber? An Arab? I was Francophone in my writing, but who or what was I in my life? There was a zone of silence, inhabited by words of love I pronounced only in Arabic and kept safe in my memory. One morning I found myself writing the famous first lines of *L'Amour, la fantasia*...⁴

In the colonial context, cross-cultural initiation occurs on a daily basis within the framework of oppression: as a result, certain individuals are able, because of the colonial setting, to transgress boundaries they otherwise could not, while others become the victims of rigid identity categories. Djébar is of course an example of the former, and this is the central paradox of her writing: as many critics note, her French education and language enabled her to circulate outside but also were the tools of her people's oppressor. This 'zone of silence' Djébar refers to reflects the tensions present in the writing subject: much

³ See Assia Djébar 'Women's Memory Spans Centuries', Interview with Clarisse Zimra, *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), 180; Jacques Berque, 'La langue de l'envahisseur,' *Le Nouvel Observateur* 1086 (30 August-5 September 1985), 54.

⁴ Djébar, 'Woman's Memory', 184.

of her work, and especially *L'Amour, la fantasia*, consists of an effort to reconcile the contradictions between to write in French and to love in Arabic, to be free to write and to feel constrained, as well as the wish to transmit through writing both an individual experience and a collective one.

Her early transgression of gender norms is both revelatory of the contradictions inherent to the border subject position and an inspiration for Djébar's semi-autobiographical account. Similar to *L'Amant*, photographs also appear as important in the Algerian quartet, and in a scene from *Vaste est la Prison* --a scene which Mireille Calle-Gruber refers to as 'prémonitoire de l'oeuvre à venir'--Djébar's father, a schoolteacher, includes Djébar in a group photograph of his all-boy class: 'Elle perçoit, mais si confusément, qu'elle détonne: ailleurs cela ne doit pas se faire, de placer une fillette toute seule parmi ces quarante garçons, en outre plus âgés'.⁵ Here Djébar symbolizes the disavowed world of women, the hidden and the absent ones, but she, unlike all these others, is thrust into the middle of (male) public space, 'elle détonne'. As a result, this photograph prefigures not only Djébar's unique ability to circulate, 'ailleurs cela ne doit pas se faire', and to participate 'toute seule' on the stage of literature but also the accompanying alienation: 'Pourquoi moi? Pourquoi à moi seule, dans la tribu, cette chance?' (AF 239). As a woman writer, Djébar defies the phantom-like role prescribed to women. She also comes to inhabit a location between women's world and men's: an awkward position exemplified in her scandalous inclusion as the only girl--her expression slightly frightened, her body folded inwards--surrounded by confident, serious-looking boys in this emblematic photograph.⁶

⁵ Calle-Gruber, *Assia Djébar*, 16; Djébar, *Vaste*, 270-271.

⁶ This photograph is reprinted in *World Literature Today* 70, no.4 (Autumn 1996), 786 and in Calle-Gruber, *Assia Djébar*, 255; see Mildred Mortimer for a slightly different reading of this photograph, 'Reappropriating the Gaze in Assia Djébar's Fiction and Films', *World Literature Today* 70, no.4 (Autumn 1996), 865.

Les Réveries de la femme sauvage opens with the image of a narrator who frantically writes five pages about her Algerian childhood, in the middle of the night, which she then misplaces. She tears the house apart, aided by her mother and stops the hunt through her piles of papers only when she realizes that the loss of these pages serves as a metaphor for her relationship to Algeria: 'Eh bien, . . . c'est exactement ce qui se passait avec Algérie, du temps où j'y vivais: je l'avais, je la tenais – je ne l'avais plus, je ne l'avais jamais eue, je ne l'ai jamais embrassée' (RF 13-14). The loss of several pages of text, which symbolise Algeria, provides the beginning of the semi-autobiographical project. In this way, the text establishes a link between writing and Algeria from the onset: Algeria is that which the written cannot capture. The underlying question becomes, what did it mean to be present in French Algeria, especially if one was a woman who defied expectations for one's race or gender?

While Djébar uncomfortably perches in a world foreign to women, the narrator of *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage* strives to bridge racial divides. She stubbornly insists on her Algerian-ness, but the Algerians reject her as French; the French in turn exclude her as a Jew. The Algerians exclude her because of her passport and for racial/economic grounds: in Cixous's essay entitled 'Pieds-nus'--the title plays on *pieds-noirs*--an Algerian shoeshine boy, who has no shoes of his own, smears blood red polish on a young Jewish girl's new, white patent leather shoes.⁷ The girl is immobilized: 'Si j'avais été innocente j'aurais crié, je me serais enfuie'.⁸ In spite of the restrictions placed on the Algerian Jews by Vichy--they lost French citizenship, the right to work and attend school--there was no feeling of solidarity between Jews and Arabs: 'J'avouai. J'étais coupable. Devant son tribunal à lui, l'acquittement dont je jouissais à mes yeux depuis Vichy n'avait aucune valeur'.⁹ In this way, the young Jewish narrator's unwelcome presence in French Algeria brings to light the

⁷ Cixous, 'Pieds-nus', *Une Enfance Algérienne*, edited by Leïla Sebbar (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 53-64.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

Anti-Semitism and prejudices of both peoples, 'Je n'avais rien à faire dans ce pays'.¹⁰ As a student in the predominately French Lycée Fromentin, History determined that she did not belong: she claims that Lycée Fromentin reeked of Vichy. In this *lycée*, she was the only Jew in her class, and she recognized the schools Anti-Semitism and imperialism, for she notices the furtive shifts in meaning and cover-ups by the French and History-Geography teachers.¹¹ Both Cixous and Djébar from early on were confronted, the former because of race, the latter because of gender, with the experience of being "there were they should not be". The experience of non-belonging becomes the impetus for the authors' investigation of what it meant, in their own lives, to be a border subject: the approach to the beloved other becomes the privileged site for their inquiry.

Love story

The initial trespass across gender and racial divisions results in multiple transgressions, including linguistic, spatial, corporal and territorial ones. In the semi-autobiographical scenes that describe love in *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage*, the authors explore the reverberations of their ability to cross borders. In the telling of Djébar's Parisian wedding night and the narrator of *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage* passionate affection for the family maid, which I investigate below, the text draws explicit and implicit connections between the historical and the semi-autobiographical. As a consequence, the border subject's experiences of love become the first stop on a journey which reverses the authorial flight from Algeria in the 1950s: here their writing moves backwards towards the authors' *coeur intime* but also includes the broader investigation of the personal and historical construct that is the nation Algeria. For to write about love in the colonizer's language and

¹⁰ Cixous, 'Albums et légendes', *Hélène Cixous, Photos de racines*, 206.

¹¹ Cixous, 'Lettre à Zohra Drif', *Leggendaria* 14(April 1999), 6-7.

on the world stage involves a revelation of the authors' intimate life: this is provocative, because it asserts the importance of women's desire in precisely the space where cultures and civilizations are forced to co-inhabit.

Djebar writes an alternative version of history, for she intersperses autobiographical material and historical incidents--principally women's stories--and thus directly subverts the call of the Algerian government in the 1980s for the writing of an "official" Algerian history: responding to this campaign, puppet intellectuals duly produced pompous, nationalistic works.¹² In *L'Amour, la fantasia*, Djebar transcribes a series of semi-autobiographical love scenes into French, for example, her parents' affectionate marriage, her cloistered cousins correspondence with young men--all incidents pregnant with allusions to writing, for example the postcard her father sends her mother and her cousins' love letters. Djebar also includes a version of her own life, interlinked with "forgotten" incidents from Algerian history, for example, her own displaced Parisian wedding night, 'ces noces parisiennes, envahies de la nostalgie du sol natal' and that of Princess Badra over a hundred years ago (AF 123). Thus, the thread that unites the text is stories of writing, often in defiance of a taboo, and love stories that are also forbidden or outside the law. By including events from her own life, Djebar emphasizes the specificity of her account and brings to light both the personal and historical incidents glossed over in glorifying, typically unifying nationalistic accounts.

The distinguishing characteristic of Djebar's Parisian wedding night is its geographical displacement echoed in the absences of ritual and individuals: for example, the husband forgets to pray for the marriage's blessing, the father in Algeria cannot bless the union, and her kinswomen do not display the blood-stained sheet as proof of the bride's virginity. Although the bride had always considered marriage as liberating, 'le mariage signifiait pour

¹² Hafid Gafaiti, 'The Blood of Writing: Assia Djebar's Unveiling of Women and History', *World Literature Today* 70, no.4 (Autumn 1990), 814.

moi départ: frontières à franchir à la hâte. . .' (AF 122), she begins to feel ambivalent, evidenced when she sends a telegram to her absent father reassuring him of her love, and this gesture reveals that the wedding night outside of tradition disturbs the narrator: 'La jeune fille s'aperçut qu'elle souffrait de l'absence du père' (AF 121). Her ambivalence underlines the complexity of transgressing societal expectations, and moreover, how complete severance from traditions or history is impossible. Indeed, the bride finds herself, surprisingly, longing for even the most antiquated traditions, such as the father wrapping her in his *burnous* and guiding her over the threshold: this, although, she knows that even if she had been married in Algeria, 'mon père n'aurait emprunté aucun burnous de pure laine, tissé par les femmes de la tribu, pour m'enlacer et me faire franchir le seuil' (AF 121). The traditions absent from this displaced ceremony, which takes place 'hors la protection du père' (AF 121), become omens that foretell the union's breakdown: 'Non, me dis-je, ni Dieu, ni quelque formule magique ne protégeront cet amour que l'homme espère 'jusqu'à la mort' (AF 124). Thus the couple's love story balances, from the beginning, on the threshold of the old and the new as well as between a beginning and an end: the failure of their marriage surfaces in other incidents recounted in *L'Amour, la fantasia* as well as in *Vaste est la Prison*.

The bride finds herself, therefore, in confusingly new territory, far from the father's protection, outside the traditions of home, but able nonetheless to distance herself from her mother's world--a world whose presence is felt with the mother's arrival: 'L'arrivée de ma mère et de ma soeur si jeune me reliait aux souvenirs lents du passé' (AF 122). Initially, the sister's and mother's presence reinforces the link to the past. And yet, as the narrator requests that her mother and sister spend the wedding night in a hotel--a distancing gesture-- she uses words that evoke the French conquest of Algeria and the subsequent

liberation: in this way, the personal, semi-autobiographical events of the Parisian wedding night, described in *L'Amour, la fantasia* resonate with a collective Algerian history.

Rougissante mais volontaire, j'ai réussi à dire devant la jeune mère, et la soeur, à la tendresse qui rassure:
---Laissez-moi la maison seule pour cette nuit, s'il vous plaît! .
."Il" vous emmènera dormir à l'hôtel!
J'ai formulé ce souhait sur un ton conventionnel . . . Puisque le destin ne me réservait pas des noces de bruits, de foules et de victuailles, que me fût offert un désert des lieux où la nuit s'étalerait assez vaste, assez vide, pour me retrouver face à "lui"--- j'évoquai soudain l'homme à la manière traditionnelle.

(AF 123-124)

The bride demonstrates thus how exercising certain customs, for example, employing the pronoun 'Il' to designate 'l'homme', does not exclude her independence: in this way, she reflects the dilemma of a newly independent nation, Algeria, which also hesitates between the past and future, modernity and tradition. History invades, therefore, the language used to describe even the most intimate autobiographical experiences, for example, when the narrator qualifies her request that her mother and sister spend the wedding night in a hotel as 'ma victoire' (AF 123), for *victoire* could easily describe either the conquest of Algeria or its liberation. In this way, language provides one stepping-stone between the semi-autobiographical past and Algerian traumas.

In 1845, during the French conquest of Algeria, Chérif Bou Maza kidnaps Badra, the Caïd of Mazouna's daughter, the night before her wedding in an act intended to provoke and insult her father. Badra spends her wedding night in his tent, but the next morning when the captors force the women to relinquish their jewels as booty, Badra emerges unbidden from her ravisher's tent, strips off her heavy gold anklets and bracelet crying, 'Je

suis nue! Louange à Dieu, je suis nue!' (AF 115). Her defiance here clearly transgresses society's expectations, as is evidenced by the other female captive's disapproving reaction, 'Alors le pépiement collectif fusa, hostile' (AF 114). Chérif trembling turns his back and rides away on horseback. His retreat is clearly Badra's victory, which suggests that the theme of rapt/rape, evoked also by the Eugene Delacroix's painting, reproduced on the cover of the first printing of *L'Amour, la fantasia* entitled *L'Enlèvement de Rébecca* (1858), is not so simple.¹³ The raped ones are not vanquished--as Badra's defiance proves; desire is polemically present between the various couples, Djébar and her husband, Badra and Chérif, and more problematically, between France and Algeria.

Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather* characterises the colonials' persistently gendered vision of the New World or of the conquered land as 'porno-tropics', given the Western explorer's or colonial's eagerness to ravish "new", "virgin" lands.¹⁴ And yet, although the relationship between Algeria and France portrayed in *L'Amour, la fantasia* contains the elements of porno-topics, Djébar suggests that between this country-couple floats an ambivalent, destructive, but oddly tender mutual desire. Indeed, in one of the sketches that takes place before liberation, 'La fille du gendarme français', a warm but complicated friendship exists between an Algerian woman and the French wife of the local *gendarme*. The suggestion is that the relationship between French and Algerian individuals as well as between Algeria and France is more complicated than nationalist discourses admit. And yet, in a dual reference to her own wedding night and to the conquest of Algeria, the foreplay between couples and countries contains illusory possibilities that are then destroyed by actual intercourse: 'L'amour, c'est le cri, la douleur qui persiste et qui s'alimente, tandis que s'entrevoit l'horizon de bonheur. Le sang une fois écoulé, s'installe

¹³ The second printing of *L'Amour, la fantasia* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995) has Delacroix's *Exercice des Marocains* (1832) on the cover.

¹⁴ See Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995).

une pâleur des choses, une glaire, un silence' (AF 124). By placing the narrator's wedding night side-by-side with Badra's, framed within the portrait of the 'copulation obscène' between Algeria and France (AF 25), Djébar suggests that love and violence, in this landscape of transgressions, are inextricable.

In a manner similar to *L'Amour, la fantasia*, *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage* also focuses on desire and love as the site in which the consequences of the border-subject's predicament come to light. The title of *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage* evokes uncontrollable, devouring female desire, but it also refers to a part of Algiers, the Ravin de la femme sauvage, situated close to the Clos-Salembier where the Cixous family lived in the Southeast periphery of Algiers. Today *bidonvilles* exist in this area, and in the 1950s mostly Algerians lived there: 'Alors qu'aux Clos-Salembier on est loin, on ne voit rien, on ne sait rien' (RF 67). *La femme sauvage* is, moreover, an ogress in Kabyle folktales, associated with wildfire and unbridled femininity,¹⁵ which recalls the other mythological reference in Cixous's oeuvre, the Medusa in 'Le Rire de la méduse' (1975). A ravine underlines the symbolic link in colonial imagery between female sexual organs and land: it also evokes the edge of the city--the place where civilisation ends and the wild begins. *La femme sauvage* is, in some ways, a border woman who escapes patriarchal control and inhabits the in-between of cultures, languages, and countries, not unlike the narrator, who is also caught in a power struggle between Algeria and France.

Clearly the central love story of *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage* is the narrator's all-consuming longing for Algeria, 'avec l'entêtement d'un fou d'amour' (RF 15). A desire that resonates, moreover, in the text's first and last refrain-like sentence: '*Tout le temps où je vivais en Algérie je rêvais d'arriver un jour en Algérie*' (Italics in text, RF 168). The loss of the five pages leads to the narrator's realization that the dynamics between her and Algeria were

¹⁵ Winifred Woodhull, *Transfigurations of the Maghreb: Feminism, Decolonization and Literatures* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 57.

that of a tortured love affair. Phaedra-like, the maddened narrator pursues Algeria, infected with a '*maladie algériè*' (Italics in text, RF 16), and finally, after much frustrated effort, realises her love to be unreciprocated, and flees to Paris to become a writer: 'Et je mis ma propre folie à ma propre oeuvre (...) j'avais perdu un trésor irremplaçable' (RF 17). If, as Shiach explains, Cixous's first experience of hierarchical, dualist structures of power, which were frequently violent, occurred in French colonial Algeria, and much of her oeuvre actively resists such paradigms, then it can be added that her Algerian childhood also resulted in a quasi-sexual frustration.¹⁶

The sexual overtones to the language used to describe Algeria, such as 'je vivais *dans* la ville d'Alger et cherchais une entrée' (Italics in text, RF 13), underlines the intensity of the narrator's desire for Algeria, and of Algeria's resistance to her. On the one hand, the narrator resembles the explorer or conqueror in her language and eagerness to "penetrate"; on the other hand, in *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage*, this similarity is complicated by the narrator both being inside and outside of Algeria. While in Algeria, the narrator desired to be invited into its intimacy, symbolised by the Algerian home: 'The Arabs considered me as French'.¹⁷ Algeria was Cixous's homeland, but she was not Algerian; she had a French passport, but she was not French, 'pendant dix-huit ans *j'étais réellement inséparable (sic)*' (Italics in text, RF 89): as a Jew in French Algeria, hers was an impossible situation. Access to France was denied to her—for example, the narrator's school friend Françoise, clearly named for France, never invites her: 'Je ne peux pas entrer dans la maison de Françoise où les Juifs ne sont pas admis . . .' (RF 126). The narrator is both frustrated and angry at being excluded by the French—Françoise's mother capriciously forbids her daughter to go to the races with the narrator, and the narrator telephones to plead with her, but the mother refuses, 'Je hurle dans le téléphone jusqu'à ce que Madame raccroche' (RF 130).

¹⁶ Morag Shiach, *Hélène Cixous, A Politics of Writing* (London: Routledge, 1991), 7.

¹⁷ Cixous, (untitled paper presented at National Jewish Book Week, London, England 23 April 2002).

The description of speaking to France, 'c'est à la France que je parle' (RF 129), refers to a transliteration from Algerian Arabic in which 'la France' means the country and the French. As a Jew, she was caught in a no man's land between Algeria and France, with a strong but futile sense of where she belonged.

Perhaps the closest the narrator comes to "entering" Algeria is with 'notre Aïcha', the beloved family maid, who clearly incarnates Algeria: 'c'est la seule Algérie que j'aie jamais pu toucher froter retoucher tâter palper arquer mon dos à son mollet fourrer ma bouche entre ses seins ramper sur ses pentes épicées' (RF 90). The series of verbs accentuates an erotic quality, for if the narrator seeks comfort in Aïcha's bosom, then she also explores her and 'ses pentes épicées' just as cartographers, faced with "newly discovered" lands, hungrily climbed over hills and mountains. Completely different from Omi, the maternal grandmother, the mother and the narrator, 'dans notre famille c'est une discrète virilité, mis à part la poitrine peu développée, au pas bref sec extrêmement rapide sobre net...': Aïcha is, on the contrary, 'lente crémeuse une jatte de lait sur le point de bouillir qui ne déborde pas remue de l'intérieur des épaisseurs désirables une gélatine enivrante à contempler pour son légèrissime frémissement' (RF 91). In this way, Aïcha becomes the desired über-maternal, but in contrast to the 'porno-tropics' of the coloniser's vision, the narrator comes from her: 'Je suis conjugée d'elle' (RF 92). Cixous plays, therefore, with the metaphor of the conquered land as ravished woman: at the same time, she transforms Aïcha into the country (Algeria) she desires. And yet, Aïcha eludes her captor's determined pursuit. This is perhaps ultimately a lesson for the narrator: no matter how much one desires, or indeed loves the other, one cannot claim them, trespass their boundaries or enter into their intimacy without invitation.

As a consequence of the narrator's *folie*, she unwittingly replicates the colonial strategy with regard to naming, although she is over-sensitised to its implications. An individual's

name, and one's use of it, is an important part of intimacy. McClintock suggests that the dynamics of naming indicates male discomfort with their intangible contribution to reproduction; therefore, assigning the child the father's name attempts to disavow women's visibly active role by reducing her to an empty vessel. She claims, moreover, that 'the imperial act of discovery can be compared with the male act of baptism' in which 'western men publicly disavow the creative agency of others'.¹⁸ Cixous further shows how even those with the best of intentions end up duplicating such strategies, for it transpires that Aïcha is not the maid's real name: 'à présent tous nous savons qu'Aïcha s'appelait Messaouda. . .' (RF 93). Thus the narrator and her brother effectively appropriate Aïcha by mis-naming her, and this, despite their vigilance 'de jamais commettre agression sur les noms propres comme cela s'est toujours fait chez les autres' (RF 93). This demonstrates the difficulty if not impossibility of avoiding, even for those who are aware, the replication of colonising gestures. It transpires, moreover, that as a young midwife, the narrator's mother, 'étant débutante j'ai fait des erreurs grossières que j'ai cessé de faire plus tard', lets Aïcha unnecessarily suffer during labour: 'Cette Aïcha accrochée à une corde sur un sorte de véranda et qui s'appelle en vérité Messaouda je ne peux pas l'oublier' (RF 95). In this way, the individual, here Aïcha, closest to the family symbolizes an intimate, a stranger as well as a victim.

Looking back, the narrator realises that despite her adoration of Aïcha, she was never invited to her home, 'Je me niche contre Aïcha depuis ses genoux je regarde ses dents être la blancheur dans le rouge de sa bouche. J'étais sur elle, dis-je. Mais je n'ai jamais été chez elle' (RF 90). To go 'chez Aïcha' means to be *invited* to Aïcha's home but also to be received as an insider, 'Tout le temps du Clos-Salembier j'ai rêvé d'aller un jour chez Aïcha dans son chez' (RF 92). The narrator questions her mother about whether she was ever

¹⁸ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 29.

invited to Aïcha's house, and her mother answers no, never: 'Un pays où l'on n'est jamais invitée est-ce un pays, où l'on vit pendant des dizaines d'années est-ce un pays' (RF 98-99). This captures the narrator's deep frustration, for she maintains that the rigidity of identity categories (Arab/French) resulted in divisions that both groups maintained through the dialectic of coloniser and colonised, and in which there was no room for the third party Cixous represented: 'si c'est un pays, un pays sans porte sans seuil est comme l'enfant qui est né sans oreille il a peut-être des anomalies de l'intérieur aussi mais tout n'est peut-être pas si simple dans cette affaire' (RF 99). The implication here is that in the innermost centre of Algeria, the ears of which are deaf her entreaties, things are awry--'anomalies' are present: this perhaps hints at the post-independence intolerance of different languages and cultures.

Tellingly, *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage* portrays Algeria as a fortress with locked doors: '*comment je voulais que la porte s'ouvre*' (Italics in text, RF 9). What is hidden from the narrator, concealed behind closed doors is Algeria, which she wishes to enter, 'encore maintenant je longe la muraille je tâte je rêve d'entrer dans le pays dont je suis l'avorton entêté' (RF 96). The narrator tried to force her way into Algeria, while she was there, but only to meet with rejection. She interrogates first her mother and her brother as to whether they were ever invited inside an Algerian home. Both answer no. And then, her brother adds, 'J'ai connu l'Algérie . . . j'ai toujours eu la sensation d'être beaucoup plus sorti que toi' and Cixous tries to answer: 'Je voulais entrer, j'allais dire, mais il est reparti sur le Vélo dans la direction opposée, dans la maison charnelle d'Aïcha dis-je' (RF 105). Her brother's successful entry into Algeria reveals that perhaps it is also the force of the narrator's desire, which translates into a demanding approach to the other, which keeps her from entering into Algeria.

If non-belonging becomes the impetus for the semi-autobiographical writing project, then love scenes unfold the full consequences of this experience. Wary of narratives that

are predicated on generalisations, and therefore, reproduce societal divisions or nationalistic narratives, the authors focus instead on the disorientation of the individual subject involved in formative love dramas--ones shaped by the historical circumstances of colonialism. In *L'Amour, la fantasia*, Djébar connects the semi-autobiographical with the historical, in an effort to demonstrate how the story of one's life similar to the story of a nation is multiple and rarely simple. In a markedly different approach, Cixous re-creates the events of her Algerian childhood, including the narrative self's passionate feelings towards Algeria that demonstrates the imitation of and escape from the dynamics of the colonial mission. The authors are uniquely but uncomfortably poised to reflect through their semi-autobiographical writings, the cracks in French and Algerian official, monolithic narratives as well as in their own semi-autobiographical ones.

Language, flight and fugitives

When the master's language must be used for the personal as well as the political, then it becomes a highly contentious instrument, because as Cixous puts it, 'à un certain moment pour qui a tout perdu, que ce soit d'ailleurs un être ou un pays, c'est la langue qui devient pays'.¹⁹ However, linguistic alienation forms an integral part of the experience of non-belonging. For Cixous and Djébar language becomes a refuge, but it also becomes the reason for flight. The French language enabled the authors' transformation, literally and figuratively, into fugitives: 'I fled. I'm a fugitive', claims Cixous with reference to her voluntary flight to Paris in 1955, while Djébar describes herself as 'fugitive et ne le sachant pas' because of her 'allers-retours' between cities (Paris and Algiers) and languages (French

¹⁹ Cixous, 'De la Scène de l'inconscient dans la scène de l'histoire', *Hélène Cixous, chemins d'une écriture* (Paris: PUV, Saint-Denis, 1990), 19.

and Arabic) for close to fifty years.²⁰ If, as Salman Rushdie points out, we tend to regard the past as 'a country from which we have all emigrated', then Djébar and Cixous clearly fled with particularly unwieldy linguistic baggage--a predicament evidenced in the writings of many exiled writers--and therefore, part of writing the past involves settling accounts with French and/or the actual flight from Algeria.²¹

The famous first lines of *L'Amour, la fantasia* describe a young Arabic girl leaving home hand in hand with her father, dressed in a European suit topped with a fez, to attend the French school (AF 11). What makes this a potentially destabilising journey, the aftermath of which many critics have examined, is that the narrator/Djébar was one of only a few thousand girls across all of North Africa who went to French Schools in the 1940s and 1950s.²² On the one hand, the author's ability to defy cultural constraints was in Djébar's words a 'petit miracle';²³ on the other hand, if the French language enabled movement and freedom, it was unforgettably the instrument of Algeria's colonizers: 'Il y avait du sang dans cette langue'.²⁴ The famous first lines of *L'Amour, la fantasia* illustrate such contradictions:

Fillette arabe allant pour la première fois à l'école, un matin d'automne, main dans la main du père. Celui-ci, un fez sur la tête, la silhouette haute et droite dans son costume européen, porte un cartable, il est instituteur à l'école française. Fillette arabe dans un village du Sahel algérien.

(AF 11)

²⁰ Hélène Cixous, (untitled paper presented at National Jewish Book Week, London, England 23 April 2001); Assia Djébar, 'L'Écriture de l'expatriation,' in *Ces yeux qui m'assiègent. . . en marge de ma francophonie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), 207.

²¹ Salman Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands,' in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 12.

²² See Mildred Mortimer, *Journeys through the French African Novel* (London: Heinemann: 1990), 147-164.

²³ Djébar, 'Le Désir sauvage de ne pas oublier' in *Le Monde*, (26 October 2000).

²⁴ Djébar, 'Territoires des langues,' interview by Lise Gauvin, in *L'Écrivain francophone à la croisée des langues: entretiens* (Paris: Editions Karthala, 1997), 25-26.

The use of the impersonal third person, fragmented sentence structure, and repetition suggest the description of a painting or a photograph. Here the 'fillette' is framed first by the village and second the Algerian Sahel. In these first lines, the images (the father's dress—'fez' and 'costume européen') and words ('arabe', 'européen', 'l'école française', 'Sahel algérien') juxtapose the conflicting entities (nations, cultures and civilisations) of colonial Algeria. This image-photograph captures the beginning of a journey that runs parallel to that of Algeria.

Critics have often read the opening paragraph in terms of how the French language, through the father's intercession--'un don d'amour'--empowered Djébar to move beyond her society's and culture's limits for women (AF 243).²⁵ Mildred Mortimer reads the consequences of the opening scene of *L'Amour, la fantasia*, as Djébar's father setting her on a bilingual and bicultural journey that would be mirrored in that of Algeria.²⁶ This is clearly a plausible reading, especially since Djébar makes perfectly clear that this was the case: 'je n'aurais jamais été écrivain, si, à dix ou onze ans, je n'avais pu continuer mes études secondaires; or ce petit miracle fut rendu possible grâce à mon père instituteur, homme de rupture et de modernité'.²⁷ And yet, there are two aspects that can be added to the notion of a linguistic/cultural journey. First, Djébar describes her acquisition of the French language as a 'mariage forcé'; in other words, her father delivered to the enemy, 'certains pères n'abandonnaient-ils pas leur fille à un prétendant inconnu ou, comme dans ce cas, au camp ennemi?' (AF 239). Second, the father's intercession distances Djébar from the figure conspicuously absent in the first paragraph above: in other words, the mother who watches silently as her daughter leaves. The French language, through the father's intervention, severs Djébar from the maternal world; but she continues nonetheless to cross the

²⁵ See Zimra's 'Disorienting the Subject in Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*', *Yale French Studies: Another Look, Another Woman: Retranslations of French Feminism* 87 (1995), 155.

²⁶ Mildred Mortimer, *Journeys*, 147-164.

²⁷ Djébar, 'Le Désir sauvage'.

threshold between the maternal world and the outside one, for many of the incidents related in *L'Amour, la fantasia*, e.g. the testimony of war heroines that Djébar transcribes, would be accessible only to someone with an insider's access.

Had Djébar remained with her mother and never attended the French school, the question, 'I was Francophone in my writing, but who or what was I in my life?' would probably not be asked.²⁸ Mortimer argues that, for Djébar, leaving the maternal world was necessary for her development as a writer, artist and an intellectual, but left her with the uneasy feeling that her French education and freedom of movement had severed her from the majority of her Algerian sisters'.²⁹ It should be added that this alienation from other women prompts the inward, autobiographical journey:

Auprès de mes cousines, vers dix ou onze ans, je jouissais du privilège reconnu d'être "l'aimée" de mon père, puisqu'il m'avait préservée, sans hésiter, de la claustration.

Mais les princesses royales à marier passent également de l'autre côté de la frontière, souvent malgré elles, à la suite des traités qui terminent les guerres.

(AF 240)

Similar to the princesses she alludes to above, Djébar finds herself, especially after liberation, on the other side of the border. The French language estranges her from her cloistered cousins, and loneliness characterizes her position: 'Solitude du départ. Sortie du harem, au début des années cinquante—pour les centaines, ou les quelques milliers de Maghrébines comme moi—grâce à l'étude du français considérée comme chance'.³⁰ And

²⁸ Djébar, 'Woman's Memory', 184.

²⁹ Mortimer, *Journeys*, 150.

³⁰ Djébar, 'Du Français comme butin', in *Ces Voix qui m'assiègent. . . en marge de ma francophonie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), 69.

yet, the French language enables Djébar to circulate and provides her with a weapon against the constricting brothers.

If writing in French exposes the other--who is also her self--it also widens the gap of education, fame and mobility between Djébar and other Algerian women: 'Mot torches qui éclairent mes compagnes, mes complices; d'elles, définitivement, ils me séparent. Et sous leur poids, je m'expatrie' (AF 161). She finds herself, therefore, like the 'princesses royales' on the other side of the border in enemy territory. Not only does her illumination of other women's lives risk exposing too much, and therefore, repeating the oppressive gesture, but her writing distances her from other women and from herself: 'Me mettre à nu dans cette langue me fait entretenir un danger permanent de déflagration' (AF 241). This clearly illuminates the dilemma of the border subject who wishes to transmit a message: she must continually balance between the risk of repeating the oppressive gesture and the realization that writing can potentially liberate others as it has freed her. Calle-Gruber argues that although writing in French displaces Djébar from her community, it is the only way through a 'bâtardise' or 'métissage' of the language to include and forefront the other.³¹ Djébar stakes out space in the French language--space obtained through transcription as well as the interruptions of women's voices, and the disruption of syntax--, where Algerian women's voices can also potentially be included. 'Cette langue était autrefois sarcophage des miens'; today French remains, for the author a 'tunique de Nessus' but also the only possible language in which she can transcribe and retain a veiled approach--one that does not expose too much--to the stories of other women (AF 241, 243).

In keeping with the self-consciousness of much contemporary writing in French and the musical composition (a *fantasia*) referred to in the title, *L'Amour, la fantasia* is at once self-reflexive and polyphonic.³² On the one hand, there is Djébar's own voice--the

³¹ Calle-Gruber, *Assia Djébar*, 254.

³² *Fantasia* also refers to a dance by Arabic horsemen. See Djébar, *L'Amour*, 252-254; Mortimer, *Journeys*, 156-157; and *Le Petit Robert*, s.v. "fantasia".

appearance of the autobiographical 'I'; on the other hand, there are the voices she transcribes--voices that emerge, moreover, from all social classes, ranging from capable, uneducated women to the narrator's light-haired, bourgeois mother, from different countries, France and Algeria, as well as different historical epochs. Djébar marries the semi-autobiographical to the historical, and therefore, the individual to the collective: in this way, her writing bridges the gap between cultures, languages, and time.

With regard to the linguistic, she draws a parallel between the four wives allowed a Muslim man, and the four languages women have, 'le français pour l'écriture secrète, l'arabe pour nos soupirs vers Dieu étouffés, le libyco-berbère' and the fourth language, 'celle du corps' (AF 203). Her French becomes a powerful weapon against enclosure, which she puts to the service of other women, and that includes the echoes of the four languages:

Comme si soudain la langue française avait des yeux, et qu'elle me les ait donnés pour voir dans la liberté, comme si la langue française aveuglait les mâles voyeurs de mon clan, et qu'à ce prix, je puisse circuler, dégringoler toutes les rue, annexer le dehors pour mes compagnes cloîtrées, pour mes aïeules mortes bien avant le tombeau.

(AF 204)

This passage indicates the mission Djébar feels she has inherited, even as her access to mobility disinherited her from the maternal world and from writing in Arabic. The ability to annex the outside for the cloistered ones suggests a writing strategy that stretches towards a polyphone Algeria inclusive of women, in which no single, official history dominates: a textual space where *métissage* would occur of Arabic, Berber and French, different social classes, and a meaningful dialogue about the political landscape.

Autobiographical writing can easily stifle polyphony through the domination of the 'I': in this way, the text unwittingly creates a hegemonic vision of Algeria, and thus re-enacts

the narratives of (post)-colonial nations. Cixous's flight from Algeria, and the (non-) arrival in France, which ensures her border-subject position, enables her to assume a problematic narrative identity of a "guardian" who maintains her position on the border of hegemonic narrative strategies. In *Hélène Cixous, Photos de Racines*, Cixous presents her arrival in France as liberating her from 'l'obligation de l'identité juive':

Tout de suite ce fut la guerre. J'ai senti l'explosion, l'odeur, de la misogynie. Jusqu'ici, vivant dans un monde de femme, je ne l'avais pas sentie, j'étais juive, j'étais juif.

A partir de 1955, j'ai adopté un nationalité imaginaire qui est la nationalité littéraire.³³

The war, Cixous refers to here is, of course, her engagement with the feminist scene in Paris, which consisted of a willingness to 'veiller à ce qu'une imagination poétique ne tombe pas en poussière'.³⁴ In this way, Cixous portrays herself as taking up arms from a marginal position in order to defend women's poetic universe.

It is also important that the French-Algerian war began in earnest just after Cixous's arrival in Paris, given the oblique reference to this fact in the phrase 'Tout de suite c'était la guerre'. Although her departure from Algeria was her own choice, 'When I left Alger, I left voluntarily, not because of the war', the war was certainly a part of her daily life, given her brother's pro-Independence activities. In 1961, he is condemned to death by the OAS, and as a result, comes to live with Cixous in Bordeaux in order to finish his studies: his plans are to return to Algeria after Independence and take Algerian nationality.³⁵ The reference

³³ Cixous, 'Albums', 206.

³⁴ Calle Gruber and Cixous, *On Est Déjà Dans La Gueule du livre*, *Hélène Cixous, Photos de Racines* (Paris: des femmes, 1996), 16.

³⁵ Cixous, 'Albums', 210.

to the French-Algerian war, in the passage above, also underlines Cixous's ambiguous identity and nationality, 'I'm an inhabitant of the diaspora, politically I'm a French citizen'-an ambiguity too easily resolved in the claim above that Cixous adopted a literary nationality.³⁶ In *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage*, Cixous returns, with greater subtlety, to the implications of this flight.

The portrayal of the flight from Algeria to France in *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage* contrasts with the too neat assumption of a literary nationality described in *Hélène Cixous, Photos de Racines*. In a parable-like story which appears in *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage*, and that draws from a biblical scene, the narrator describes her flight to Paris. When the infant Jesus was brought to the temple to be blessed, Mary took with her two pigeons to be sacrificed; additionally, pigeons were traditionally sold in Jewish temples as offerings. In *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage*, the narrator's mother takes two pigeons to the rabbi to be slaughtered: 'Car on ne tue pas les animaux soi-même' (RF 141). The rabbi holds one of the pigeons between his knees, plucks its neck feathers in preparation for cutting its neck, and meanwhile, the other one escapes. The rabbi turns to the narrator's mother, 'Je regrette le deuxième pigeon doit partir aussi' (RF 141). Her mother asks, 'Qu'est-ce qui se passe?' and the rabbi answers, 'Les pigeons on ne peut pas les séparer. Ce sont des couples qui vivent ensemble et meurent ensemble' (RF141).

³⁶ Cixous, (untitled paper presented at National Jewish Book Week, London, England 23 April 2002).

Le deuxième pigeon est parti. Le vieux qui tue ouvre les mains. Je me suis envolée comme un trait, le cou déplumé, sans savoir si je suivais l'autre dans la vie ou dans la mort. Là où la mort a déjà commencé pensai-je, commence la vie. J'arrivai en France, le cou nu, il faisait tellement froid partout, dedans, dehors, en haut en bas et tout le long, je cherchais partout où me trouver et en vain. Non je n'étais pas venue en France, cet hiver, je n'y avais d'ailleurs jamais pensé à cet hiver appelé France, j'avais seulement enfin quitté l'Algérie en y laissant les plumes qui protègent l'endroit de vie.
(RF 157)

This story serves, in part, as a metaphor for the couple formed by the narrator and her brother. The narrator left Algeria first and her brother later: the narrator initially appears as the first pigeon to escape death, the one who flies away, but instead she likens herself to the one without neck feathers, the second to escape. 'Le vieux qui tue ouvre les mains' suggests not only the rabbi (RF 158), but also the situation of French colonial Algeria, from which Cixous escaped.

The story of the pigeons is significant, because it demonstrates how Cixous did not *leave for* France but *left* Algeria: 'Non je n'étais pas venue en France, cet hiver, je n'y avais d'ailleurs jamais pensé à cet hiver appelé France, j'avais seulement enfin quitté l'Algérie en y laissant les plumes qui protègent l'endroit de vie' (RF 158). These feathers that protect 'l'endroit de vie' symbolise the fleeting instances in which she felt as though she belonged, for example, when she nestled against Aïcha: such moments led to frustration but nonetheless allowed her to hope that entry into Algeria was possible. Once she leaves for France, she faces a chilly reception: 'J'arrivai en France, le cou nu, il faisait tellement froid partout, dedans, dehors, en haut en bas et tout le long, je cherchai partout où me trouver et en vain' (RF 158). In France, there is no question of her belonging: in this way, she is able to fully assume her foreign-ness and rejects Algeria as it rejected her: 'Je n'ai jamais voulu

écrire sur l'Algérie ce pays natal inconnu dont j'ai longé la haute blancheur fermée pendant tant d'années' (RF 167).

In a recent paper read in London as part of National Jewish Book week, Cixous describes how the refugees she met during her visit to Cambodia longed for a 'third country': the first country was the one they came from, the second the one they were in and the third they dreamed of reaching. She claimed, moreover, that in departing for France, she also 'was looking for a "third country"', which she found in a 'country of words'.³⁷ And yet, as is the case with most fugitives, Cixous's first country (Algeria) appears, in *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage*, as impossible to depart from and re-appears as an obsessive touchstone. Cixous left Algeria, 'un jour je fis volte-face et je rompis cet attachement' (RF 15), because of the contradictions inherent in this colonial setting, but also because of her unrequited desire for Algeria: 'Je partirai, je laisserai toute l'Algérie Clos-Salembier derrière moi, je ne reviendrai plus jamais, même en pensée' (RF 79). Thus she slams shut memory's door to Algeria, but it re-opens unbidden in the dreams of her literary imagination.

The night she scribbles the five pages, described at the beginning of *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage*, a door finally opens into Algeria: 'Je me levai donc à l'aube sereine, décidée, auréolée' (RF 10). She also describes how in the past few years prior to the writing of these five pages, she heard, early in the morning, Fips barking--the family's dog whilst in Algeria. Her father gave Fips to the narrator and her brother: after the father's death he is chained outside the house, and one day, he savagely bit the narrator: His barking, which symbolises painful memories, triggers the autobiographical process that a reluctant Cixous had avoided:

³⁷ Cixous, (untitled paper presented at National Jewish Book Week, London, England 23 April 2002).

Je ne pouvais plus désormais chasser le livre qui ne cessait de m'appeler dès que j'ouvrais la fenêtre de l'obscurité. Je me suis redressée dans mon lit en pleine nuit et avec le crayon gras qui est toujours couché à côté de ma main j'ai écrit à grands traits dans le noir: *Tout le temps où je vivais en Algérie je rêvais d'arriver un jour en Algérie.*

(Italics in text, RF 168)

The conversations between Cixous and her brother and mother provide the material for the book: the writing of it enables Cixous's acceptance of the ambiguities of her homeland. In *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage*, the narrator's mother and brother counteract linear, one-dimensional strategies by interrupting the narrative, and thus subverting the authority of the 'je'. In this way, her brother's version of the past accompanies but also undermines Cixous's own attempt to bridge her temporal and physical distance to Algeria. The negotiation between self and home in *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage* results in the creation of an imaginary homeland mediated by her family's clarifications and at times rejection of Cixous's complex memories of a fragmented home. The writing process, and the acceptance it entails, enables her to make a prosthesis however imperfect for her homeland and to feel closure.

The prosthesis Cixous fashions depends in part on dreams. Coming full circle, the last sentence of the book is identical to the first, for *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage* opens with the fragment that remains of the lost five pages:

"Tout le temps où je vivais en Algérie je rêvais d'arriver un jour en Algérie, j'aurais fait n'importe quoi pour y arriver, avais-je écrit, je ne me suis jamais trouvée en Algérie, il faut maintenant précisément que je m'en explique, comment je voulais que la porte s'ouvre, maintenant et pas plus tard, avais-je noté très vite, dans la fièvre de la nuit de juillet, car c'est maintenant, et probablement pour des dizaines ou des centaines de raisons, qu'une porte vient de s'entrebâiller dans la galerie Oubli de ma mémoire, et pour la première fois, voici que j'ai la possibilité de retourner en Algérie, donc l'obligation. . . ."

(Italics in text RF 9)

The narrator is obliged, when the opportunity presents itself, to return to Algeria. The sequence of the dreams of the *femme sauvage*, the narrator's the night she wrote this text and whilst in Algeria sets the stage for a journey through memories, which have become fantastical, unreal and incomplete. To investigate the Algerias of the mind she has crafted involves departing from the narrator's past and present dreams of an absent Algeria. Indeed, Julia Kristeva has suggested that the displaced person is always a dreamer: 'Car dans l'entre-deux de la nostalgie, imbibé de parfums et de sons auxquels il n'appartient plus et qui, à cause de cela, le blessent moins que ceux d'ici et de maintenant, l'étranger est un rêveur qui fait l'amour avec l'absence . . . !'.³⁸ Without being nostalgic, dreams become, nonetheless, in *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage*--similar to language in *L'Amour, la fantasia*--one bridge between the present and the past.

Susan Sellers points out that writing as the reparation of loss is one of the major themes of Cixous's work, and this also appears to hold true for Djébar's semi-autobiographical writing--although how the authors write about loss differs.³⁹ To write about Algeria in the past is to repair its loss, and as the circular structure of *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage* suggests, it permits closure as well: 'Mais maintenant plus j'en parle et plus j'y reviens surtout avec mon frère plus je me sens chez moi au Clos-Salembier maintenant et rétrospectivement' (RF 166). Cixous was unable to enter Algeria, while she lived there, and instead she enters Algeria through the writing of her past, which also obliquely refers to the past of the nation Algeria, in which the ramifications of colonialism were visible on a daily basis. For Djébar, a direct re-writing of history that subverts also enables the recuperation of an Algeria composed of multiple stories. Djébar re-fashions the French language, grafts the experiences of forgotten women without, however, transplanting one culture into the

³⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Etrangers à nous-mêmes* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), 21.

³⁹ Susan Sellers, *Authorship, Autobiography, Love* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1996), 17.

other. And yet, closure is impossible at the end of *L'Amour, la fantasia*, which foreshadows the breakdown of post-independence Algerian dreams: 'j'attends, je pressens l'instant immanquable où le coup de sabot à la face renversera toute femme dressée libre, toute vie surgissant au soleil pour danser!' (AF 256).

Au-delà

French Algeria formed the authors and clearly informed their writing, and as a consequence, some 40 years after their first departure, against the background of escalating violence in Algeria, their exploration of the border subject position, mediated by fiction, acquired added urgency. After all, *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage* coincided with, and in all likelihood, were an oblique response to Algerian events in the 1980s. Starting in 1984, the FIS (Front Islamique du Salut) began to gather the popularity that culminated in sweeping gains in the 1992 election; an election pre-emptively annulled by the government, the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale), before the results were counted. And yet, as Djébar continually points out, the ideology of the FIS and the FLN is hardly opposed: the main difference is that one has power and the other is trying to wrest it away. Triggered by the inter-Algerian conflict in the present--one in which intellectuals, authors and women are consistent targets for the opposing groups--the authors embark on a semi-autobiographical journey back in time to French Algeria. For, at the origins of the authors' border-subject position, which finds expression in semi-autobiographical works, resides an ambivalent image of home.

Cited by Djébar as an epigraph to her short story 'Oran, langue morte', the following quotation appears in Cixous's *La Jeune née*, 'J'ai appris à lire, à écrire, à hurler, à vomir, en

Algérie':⁴⁰ this reveals the importance of Algeria for Cixous's real and imaginary worlds. In 'Oran, langue morte', the Algerian narrator tells her Italian friend Olivia about her journey back in time to the scene of her parent's murder in a hospital room in Oran.⁴¹ In many ways, this is a process akin to the one in *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage* and *L'Amour, la fantasia*: the authors, similar to the narrator of 'Oran, langue morte', try to unearth the past, especially painful, half-forgotten memories. As the authors do so, dream-like Algerias emerge--ones assembled with the pieces the authors' remember and with gaps of what they have forgotten. As Salman Rushdie puts it, 'When the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost'.⁴²

Imperfect reflections of a lost home, such as those present in *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage*, illuminate how the border subject's view point enables productive approaches to reconstituting and examining the Algerian past, both collective and individual versions. Both authors refuse homogeneous narratives, as evidenced when Cixous writes that 'toutes les biographies comme toutes les autobiographies comme tous les récits racontent une histoire à la place d'une autre histoire'.⁴³ This conviction has left its mark on how the authors recount multiple versions/visions of the past and therefore directly challenge hegemonic, linear versions. Writing on the edges of fiction, history and autobiography involves the belief that it is possible to write a version of one's life that may free oneself, at least partly, from constraints. As a result, the semi-autobiographical *récit* leaves behind the linear autobiographical genre: instead, it creates a fusion of truth and fiction, autobiography and history, the personal and the political, French and

⁴⁰ Cixous, 'Sorties', *La Jeune née* (Paris: 10/18), 128.

⁴¹ Djébar, 'Oran, langue morte', in *Oran, langue morte* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1997), 11-48.

⁴² Rushdie, 'Imaginary', 10-11.

⁴³ Cixous, 'Albums', 179.

Arabic/German, and is uniquely suited to the border subject's preoccupation with finding a beyond, that is 'neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past'.⁴⁴

Autobiography as a 'constructed hybrid' is far from a new phenomenon,⁴⁵ but what is significant in Djébar's and Cixous's versions/visions of the past, as contained in *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage*, is Algeria. The authors' semi-autobiographical narratives share a dual conception of Algeria at the heart of their stories. On the one hand, there is Algeria as 'imaginary homeland', a reparation for a loss in the past, characterized by myths, personal anecdotes and imagery used to represent the authors' desire for a lost origin or homeland; and on the other hand, the construction that is the Algerian nation today. Their Algerias of the mind emerge in the events but also in the images, ones clearly borrowed from the city of Algiers (the doors, the harems, the steep hills, the white walls) used to construct their semi-autobiographical texts: *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage* peruses the archives of personal memory, while Djébar--in an important distinction between the authors' projects-- looks both at her own story and at historical records; by transcribing women's stories, she creates new sources. Both works focus, however, on the authors' past, their relation to their own past and the aftereffects of their Algerian childhoods.

As the authors well recognise, it is important for subordinated peoples to assert their cultural traditions and retrieve their histories; however, all too often, as Bhabha signals, in the 'calcification of colonial cultures roots become stuck in a celebratory romance of the past or a homogenization of the present'.⁴⁶ The dangers of such strategies emerge in the Algerian violence of the 1980s and 1990s in which the civil population was held hostage to the violence of political groups. For the writer faced with such a traumatic present, adopting the border-subject enables the acquisition of a guardian-like stance that revolts against the petrification of individual lives and collective histories. Djébar and Cixous

⁴⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

⁴⁵ Alex Hughes, *Heterographies: Sexual Difference in French Autobiography* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 2.

⁴⁶ Bhabha, *The Location*, 9.

present alternative visions of the past--ones coloured firstly by their semi-autobiographical experience of non-belonging as well as linguistic politics and secondly by the historical narratives that construct the nation Algeria, which unravel in the background of both their lives and writing. In this way, Cixous, but most particularly Djébar, shape the semi-autobiographical writing fabric into a medium that incarnates different visions of Algerian pasts, and thus, provides a radical re-visioning relevant, even urgent to that victim of (post-) colonialisms totalling discourse, the Algerian present.

Writing as Testimony

Le Blanc de l'Algérie (1995) and Le Jour où je n'étais pas là (2000)

If the 'semi-occluded memory of World War II' haunts the narrative and the narrative self in much contemporary French writing,¹ then within the past ten years the French-Algerian conflict and the present violence in Algeria increasingly surface in the French literary and political scene as unresolved traumas. The publication of literally hundreds of accounts, testimonies and commentaries both in France and Algeria, Jacques Chirac's 24 hours visit to Algiers in December 2001--the first by a French president in ten years--, the declaration of 2003 as 'l'année de l'Algérie' in France, and the proliferation of websites dedicated to all things Algerian indicate that the French and the Algerians are engaged, in different ways and for the most part separately, in the painful process of recovering the memories of a forgotten war and a shared, troubled past. In the preceding chapter, it was argued that the colonial past persists in haunting Cixous's and Djébar's semi-autobiographical writing: in this chapter, I will demonstrate how *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* (1995) and *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* (2000) re-animate the past in the present and raise questions about both the narrative subject and the Algerian nation today.²

¹ Colin Davis and Elizabeth Fallaize, *French Fiction in the Mitterrand Years: Memory, Narrative, Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 61.

² References to Assia Djébar's *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995) and Hélène Cixous's *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 2000) appear in the text.

Although the ostensible concerns of *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* and *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* appear to be the desire to remember a loved one, the authors' testimonies contain an attempt, by turns direct and oblique, to concretely investigate historical traumas. In keeping with the adage that 'our age can precisely be defined as the age of testimony',³ both Cixous and Djébar begin with an awareness of gender, move forward to unearth the roots of events with collective significance, such as the French-Algerian war and the Holocaust, and thus, engage with existing political and historical narratives. My claim here is that testimony as a writing strategy within *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* and *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* shifts the authors' focus away from the border subject and towards commitment to an ethical responsibility in the present.

Auto/Biographical departure points

Le Jour où je n'étais pas là contains the story of a twenty-two year old woman with a son named Georges. He is born with Down's syndrome--a chromosome mutation that results in mental retardation, heart malformations and decreased life expectancy: 'De nos jours on ne dit plus *mongolien*, Mongolien ce n'est pas bien. On dit *trisomique* c'est mieux, c'est moins voyant, c'est moins cru, c'est moins croyant, c'est plus savant et moins dieu' (Italics in text, JN 67). Throughout the text, the author plays with 'mongolien', which was commonly used to refer to children with Down's syndrome principally because of their facial characteristics: the text picks up on this and also refers to the famous horses of the Mongolian steppes, 'de petits chevaux nus plus vifs que le vent', and suggests, moreover, that a child with Down's syndrome recalls the lost country for the other: 'Nous lui donnons le mal du pays perdu' (JN 66, 68). Unwilling or unable to cope with the child, the mother entrusts him to her

³ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992), 5.

mother, a midwife, who takes him home with her to Algiers, where his uncle and the employees of her maternity clinic, named 'La Clinique', spoil him. After approximately one year Georges dies, some 16 days before his mother gives birth to her second son in Paris. These are the events that form the departure point for Cixous's *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, written some 40 years after George's death.⁴

How much of an 'histoire vraie' constitutes *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* will not concern us here at any length, except to briefly note that this text does reflect events from Cixous's life.⁵ Exactly like Cixous the unnamed narrator writes; she is Jewish; her father's (but not her son's) name was Georges; she had a son (Stéphane) who died at one year of age; she grew up in Algeria; and finally, she also has a mother who is a midwife and a brother who trained as a paediatrician. The presence of temporal and spatial markers, which are unusual in Cixous's texts, tempt the reader to consider *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* as straight-forward autobiography: for example, some of the events described in the text occur on 1 May 1999, and the movie the narrator sees that day, *Un Spécialiste* (1999), did play in Parisian cinemas that same Spring. Instead of focusing on the reflection of Cixous's life in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, this chapter will investigate the use Cixous makes of auto/biographical material, for the son's death becomes a departure point that enables the writing self to examine the narrative self--a journey, ultimately biographical, that results in a multi-faceted narrative, part-fiction, part-autobiography and part-testimony.

A tragic story is also at the core of *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*. From 1993 to 1994, three men--Mahfoud Boucebci, M'Hamed Boukhobza, and Abdelkader Alloula--are assassinated. Gunmen shoot Boucebci on his way to work; assassins torture Boukhobza to death in his

⁴ According to the 'Générique' compiled by Mireille Calle-Gruber in *Hélène Cixous, Photos de Racines* this son was born in 1960 and died in 1961. In the 'Générique' his name is given as Stéphane, whilst in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* he is referred to as Georges, the name of Cixous's father, who died and was buried in Algeria; see Calle-Gruber, 'Générique', with Hélène Cixous, *Hélène Cixous, Photos de Racines* (Paris: des femmes, 1994), 209.

⁵ Hugo Marson in his review of *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* for *Le Monde* writes: 'Les romanciers actuels aiment les histoires vraies. Leur propre histoire ou celle de criminels qui les délivre de leurs fantasmes meurtriers . . . Le récit est autobiographique, apparemment centré sur le moi'; see Marson, 'L'Enfant de vérité', review of *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* by Hélène Cixous, *Le Monde*, 20 October 2000.

bed as his daughter listens, her hands bound and a gun to her head in the living room; a bullet kills Alloula outside the door to his home. All three are Djébar's close friends; Alloula was her brother-in-law. Stunned by these deaths, Djébar locks herself in her flat and begins to write a biographical text that in its style resembles a journalistic account with memorial intent. *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* relates not only the death of these men but also their significance for loved ones and their communities: to this biographical 'récit' she adds a procession of 'écrivains d'Algérie' (BA 11). According to Hafid Gafaiti, 'in a departure from her preceding autobiographical texts, Djébar radically abandons and transcends the autobiographical limits which framed her earlier novels' and denounces in an explicit manner the present violence unfolding in Algeria.⁶

The narrators of both *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* and *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* mourn the dead by re-animating their life and death in writing. The death of a child and that of three close friends are the events that trigger the journey towards the past, which is also necessarily a biographical one. Instead of a passive lament about the death of loved ones, *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* and *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* recreate the dead one's life and thus enable the mourning process, which includes bringing the other's death to life on the written page. The authors practice, in part, what Liz Stanley refers to as 'auto/biography', which entails the inclusion of the other as inseparable from the story of one's own life;⁷ additionally, in a re-thinking of the notion of testimony, which traditionally demands the narrator's presence at the event, Cixous and Djébar daringly destabilize the authority of the narrating 'I' by emphasising the narrator's absence from the key moments of the other's life, which are precisely the moments that will be painstakingly re/created and re/told.

⁶ Hafid Gafaiti, 'The Blood of Writing: Assia Djébar's Unveiling of Women and History', *World Literature Today* 70, no. 4 (Autumn 1990), 821.

⁷ Liz Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 3.

Absence and presence

In *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, the narrator is absent from the event at the heart of the story: "Je n'étais pas avec toi" she murmurs to her son's tombstone, 'je n'étais pas avec toi le dernier jour mais toi tu ne me lâchais pas' (JN 173). Thus, the son retains a vice-like grip on his mother's conscious even from the tomb. On the one hand, the narrator's absence on the day of her son's death destabilizes the reader, since she or he relies on the narrator's presence to tell the story. On the other hand, within the context of the narrative, the narrator's absence from the event--she hears about it from her mother and brother--serves to underline the curious lack of finality to the death, and therefore, the inconclusive nature of the event:

Cet enfant, quand est-il parti? Un an je ne sors pas. Un jour, je sors. Et il s'en va. *Le jour où je ne suis pas là*. Me voilà dit le destin. Il n'y avait pas eu de moment final. Il y a nuit dans le récit. J'essaie de pousser la porte de cette nuit.

(Italics in text, Back page)

At least three key themes related to the autobiographical departure point emerge in the passage above: these suggest a crossing of the boundaries between life and death, as well as transformation and transition. First, the text plays on 'nuit'/'nuire' which evokes the presence of harm or damage, sleep and death, and as a consequence, guilt and responsibility--important themes also present in *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage*. In this way, 'nuit' ambiguously blurs into 'nuire'. Second, 'il y a nuit dans ce récit' or 'la porte de cette nuit', can refer to the unconscious, 'l'oubli', death, Algiers and the past—a metaphor echoed

throughout *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, for example, the phrase 'une porte morte' (JN 179). Passages across the borders of life/death and consciousness/unconsciousness occupy, therefore, a privileged, metaphorical position. Third, the inconclusive element--'Il n'y avait pas eu de moment final'—determines the central question of the text: 'Cet enfant, quand est-il parti?' (Back page). The narrative effort to travel backwards in time to the moment the child died, a journey which Cixous enacts in the textual repetition of the verbs 'partir', 'sortir', and 'aller', attempts not so much to answer the question, but to bring back to life through writing, the son's death; it is the key moment from which the narrator was absent. The narrator's decision to abandon the child to her own mother might be judged as a heartless, even cruel decision, but to the credit of the narrator, there are no excuses offered for this difficult choice. Her absence underpins the ethical ambiguities involved in "abandoning" a mentally disabled child, but it also enables the story to be told: for, since there is no clear-cut end, the story continues.

In *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, the narrator's absence is a recurring theme, appearing not only in the title but also in the image of an abandoned three-legged dog, which the narrator sees in the 'Bois' but does not save. Walking through the 'Bois', in all likelihood the Bois de Boulogne, on the 1 May 1999 with her mother and daughter, the narrator first hears the incessant barking of a dog: this is significant because a dog's voice is also a trigger for recollecting the past in *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage*. The barking, described as akin to an infant crying, is unbearable: 'c'était une voix jeune et qui criait criait criait ne respirez pas crier ne respirait pas crier criait' (JN 20); once the narrator sees the dog, she is paralysed, unable to intervene and unable to leave—'on ne peut vraiment pas s'en aller. . .' (JN 20)—and only her mother's intervention, 'si tu ramasses ce chien, je claque la porte, je m'en vais' (JN 23), firmly returns her to the present. For the narrator this three-legged dog evokes her odd childhood in French Algeria, with its daily humiliations, deaths and

excruciating contradictions, which perhaps over determined her abandonment of the son: 'Que faire J'ai abandonné . . . Déjà quand j'avais trois ans et tellement d'abandons et abandonnés, dont moi aussi' (JN 22). The three-legged dog symbolizes the narrator's opportunity to seize the moral high ground, to reverse history, both personal and official History, but it is of course as impossible for the author/narrator to act as it is for the reader: this point is underlined by the text ambiguously addressing the reader and the narrator, '*c'est à toi que cette voix s'adresse*' (Italics in text, JN 20).

The other's version of the event accrues importance because of the narrator's absence: in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, the witnesses are the narrator's brother and mother. The narrator's brother lived in Algiers when Georges arrived and became very attached to the child. He tells the story of his nephew's death, prompted by the narrator's questions, and in his account he is present at Georges's sickbed alongside the narrator's mother: when Georges falls ill with a high fever, the mother prevents the brother from injecting the medicine that would save Georges. The brother states: 'J'ai été étonné du sang-froid de tamère (*sic*) car elle lui était très attachée' (JN 184). Listening to the brother's version, the narrator employs the abandoned dog as a metaphor for the family:

Et la mort est enfin entrée avec une grande simplicité dans notre vie et dans notre famille qui en cet instant pouvait être comparée à un chien à trois pattes. Il y avait mon fils ma mère mon frère et je n'y étais pas.

(JN 184)

The metaphor of the dog suggests an "unnatural" absence, on the part of the child's mother who has left her baby, and thus, by re-using this metaphor, she clearly ties her

abandonment of the child to her experience of Algeria where neither her presence nor that of the French was "natural".

The narrator's mother, whom in the brother's version takes the morally ambiguous decision to put a merciful end to Georges's life, is consistently reluctant to play the role of witness. Indeed, she resists the narrator's unrelenting interrogation: 'Mais pourquoi reviens-tu sur ces trucs? . . . Mais c'est la dernière fois! dit ma mère. Je suis vieille. Ces histoires sont vieilles' (JN 188). Her version begins by contradicting the brother's, '*ton frère n'était pas là*' (JN 188). The mother claims she foresaw Georges's death, and nonetheless, chose to go out that day:

Je tenais à cet enfant mais le retenir non je n'aurais pas cherché ce n'est pas un enfant qui doit être guéri ça n'eût rimé à rien de le forcer j'ai tout de suite compris c'est le Destin qui entre. Je sors : le Destin entre.

(JN 188)

Like the narrator, the mother is also absent, but her stance contrasts with her daughter's. Although the mother is infinitely more practical and realistic than the daughter, the verbs in the passage above, 'tenir', 'retenir', 'chercher', 'comprendre' and 'entrer' all underline a movement towards the child, until this is severed by the emphatic 'Je sors', while the daughter consistently appears to move away from the child ('partir', 'sortir') in a multiplication of her abandoning gesture. An additional difference between the daughter and her mother is the latter's inability to mourn: 'Tandis que ma mère ne déposait rien que la vérité j'avais aux yeux toutes les larmes qu'elle n'a jamais versées . . .' (JN 189). The daughter asks her mother if she has forgotten the whole story, and her mother says 'Oui'

(JN 190). The distinguishing characteristic between the two individual's processes of bearing witness, with the narrator as their interrogator, is that the brother remembers and mourns the son, while the mother has effaced the memory and the pain. The daughter resembles a *pleureuse* in her belated, perhaps futile grief for her son, which is made possible by the absence of her mother's mourning.

The incommensurability of the mother's and brother's version of the event and reaction to it--suggested by the contradictions in how the brother and mother remember--echoes what Shoshana Felman finds in her reading of the film *Shoah* (1999); that is, an 'exploration of the differences between heterogeneous points of view, between testimonial stances which can neither be assimilated into, not (*sic*) subsumed by, one another'.⁸ In *Shoah* the director Claude Lanzmann films the testimony of different participants in the Holocaust, and this film's exploration of what it means to bear witness is also relevant to *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*. The 'differences between heterogeneous points of view', emphasised in a narrative strategy, which collects versions of the same story, present an incomplete, multiple view of the past or even of History. Additionally, such differences accentuate the impossibility of remembering exactly what happened: here you may ask, does the event ever end? To this question, there is no easy answer. However, with regard to 'a final truth' in the narrative of *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* the discrepancies, on essential issues, between the mother's and the brother's stories undermine both coherence and finality: no accounts are settled.

The multiple nature of truth--a multiplicity exemplified in the differences between the mother's and brother's account and the narrator's reactions--fits with Cixous's ambivalent relationship to autobiography. 'Je ne redoute rien autant que l'autobiographie,' writes Cixous, 'L'autobiographie n'existe pas....C'est un genre jaloux, décepteur, —je le déteste'.⁹

⁸ Felman, *Testimony*, 207.

⁹ Cixous, *Le Livre de Prométhea* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 27; see also, Mary E. Schipa 'Hélène Cixous: Sur la piste d'une autobiographie féministe', *Romance Review* 5, no.1 (1995), 29-37.

Such a passionate stand against autobiography collides with the self-referential nature of Cixous's oeuvre--for example, in *Le Livre de Promethea* in which the narrator is named 'H'. Her works often contain the same autobiographical references, such as her father's death, her close relationship to her mother and brother or her childhood in Oran and Algiers.¹⁰ In an article about autobiography in Cixous's writing, Mairead Hanrahan questions with reference to 'Albums et légendes' in *Hélène Cixous, Photos de Racines*, whether it is possible to reconcile the ubiquity of autobiographical references with Cixous's staunch refusal of autobiography as a genre.¹¹ Hanrahan argues that Cixous uses narratives as 'a means not of self-(dis)closure but of self-discovery, and moreover, that 'events in the author's life functions as a springboard, a point of departure'.¹² In other words, Cixous writes autobiographical events as though other to her self and, in so doing, is able to read through writing, the self she became or did not become as a result of these events. Clearly a central dynamic at play in Cixous's writing, and one often overlooked, is the transformation of auto/biographical material in her fictionalised works.

A crucial part of Cixous's strategy involves a determination to keep the picture she presents of auto/biographical events imperfect, with omissions and absences. In *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* Cixous moves beyond the investigation of her own position as a border subject to questioning how to bear witness to the other and the events concerning him/her from which the narrative self was absent, whether by design or accident. If in autobiography the self who narrates is typically embroiled with the self it observes, then it is difficult, if not impossible, for the narrative self to provide an accurate account of the observed self. Thus, the relationship between the self who narrates and the one observed is highlighted in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, but crucially the central event of the text--George's death--is one from which the narrator is absent. The consequences of a

¹⁰ Mairead Hanrahan, 'Of Autobiography' *Paragraph* 23, no. 4 (November 2000), 283.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 283

¹² *Ibid.*, 292-293.

testimony in absence include responsibility--one can be absent and still be implicated--, but it also contains the possibility of freeing oneself from morally ambiguous decisions in the past. This explicitly challenges the notion of a monolithic view of the past or present, while implicitly maintaining that the writing of multiple, incommensurable truths is a way to bear witness to events of personal importance, which often contain the same elements (abandonment, loss, mourning, memory and so on) as events of collective significance.

Absence of expression

In a 1990 interview with the journal *Algérie Actualité*, Djébar stated, referring to her writing published before *Les Alouettes naïves*: 'Avant, j'écrivais comme si j'étais loin de moi, en gardant mes masques'.¹³ Indeed, Djébar's early stance towards autobiography can be characterized as a cautious one. And yet, as we have seen in previous chapters, Djébar embraced autobiography in the 1980s and 1990s, situating herself in the tradition of another famous North African, St. Augustine. She transformed the fact that she wrote in French into the central problematic of her writing and claimed that her choice of language subverted the autobiographical project: 'J'ai senti que la langue de l'autobiographie, quand elle n'est pas la langue maternelle, fait que presque inévitablement, même sans vouloir, l'autobiographie devient une fiction'.¹⁴ As a response to the discourses in Algerian society on gender, the semi-autobiographical texts that she wrote after *Les Alouettes naïves* contained iconoclastic gestures, and these works effectively argued through their stories and writing style that to enable women's liberation implied casting off restrictive discourses, spoken and written, personal and public. In *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, Djébar takes as a departure point an autobiographical event (the loss of her three friends) from which she was absent and

¹³ Djébar, 'Un Entretien avec Assia Djébar', interview by Thoria Smati, *Algérie Actualité*, (29 Mars 1990--4 April 1990), 12.

¹⁴ Djébar, 'Territoires des langues,' interview by Lise Gauvin, in *L'Écrivain francophone à la croisée des langues: entretiens* (Paris: Editions Karthala, 1997), 23.

transforms her mourning process into biographical text that simultaneously conceals and reveals.

When discussing Djébar's project in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, it is important to distinguish between her writing practice in this text and *témoignage*, which was the writing practice advocated by Algerian revolutionaries during the war, because Djébar's text appears to contain an indirect dialogue with Lacheraf's article 'L'Avenir de la culture algérienne' (1963).¹⁵ The following is an excerpt from an interview Djébar gave in 1968:

Je me souviens lors de mon premier roman en 1956, avoir pensé farouchement que, vivant en plein les incidents de la guerre d'Algérie, il aurait été indécent de ma part d'utiliser cette vie comme thème...D'une part je me méfias, je me méfie toujours d'une littérature à priori de témoignage; d'autre part, parce que j'écrivais en français, je pensais alors que je n'avais à faire entrevoir "aux autres" qu'une surface de moi et des miens. Quelque chose comme "j'écris pour cacher ce qui me semble le plus important".¹⁶

Djébar's *méfiance* about *témoignage* as evidenced in her refusal--one costly to her reputation in revolutionary circles--to espouse it in her own writing, enabled the development of a writing that concealed and/or protected but also exposed. Her situation as a woman writer, and as an Algerian woman writer who never had to wear the veil but whose mother and cousins did, made her extra sensitive to the over-exposure that *témoignage* involved. As Djébar suggests, to reveal too much would mean to hand the "other", here France and the French, a victory.

And yet, in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* Djébar not only echoes much of the language of Lacheraf's 'La Culture Algérienne' but also embraces a writing strategy that appears to be a close relation to *témoignage*. In an interview Djébar claims that the death of Alloula was

¹⁵ Mostapha Lacheraf, 'L'Avenir de la culture algérienne', Interview with M.M. Brumagne in *Les Temps Modernes*, no. 209 (October 1963), 720-745.

¹⁶ Djébar, 'Le Romancier dans la cité arabe', *Europe* 474 (October 1968),119.

'comme si vraiment c'était au coeur de la culture algérienne que le danger s'installait' and asks in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, referring to Algeria and its culture 'Quel chemin, c'est-à-dire quel avenir?' (BA 259): these two quotations obliquely refer back to Lacheraf's article in which he boldly outlined the path Algeria had to take, in his opinion, to re-claim its culture and, as an aside, took Djébar to task for knowing nothing about Algeria.¹⁷ So it is surprising--some twenty years after Lacheraf's article--for Djébar to suggest that there is something to be gained from a kind of *témoignage*. On the one hand, Djébar explicitly sets out to write the facts, and in particular, those relevant to the failure of the revolution. On the other hand, when writing about the dead she provides a factual account that is circumspect, respectful and obeys her own dictum of 'language like a veil'. Thus, in a daring move she turns *témoignage* back on its proponents: the only people she over-exposes are the former revolutionaries turned corrupt, oil-rich politicians, and she sheds merciless light on their misdeeds, occulted by "official Algerian history" during the struggle for independence.

In *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, Djébar determinedly investigates how the utopian dreams of the Revolution unravelled and, in this way, suggest that her friends' murders are both a consequence and manifestation of the slow death of the Algerian nation. And yet, the trigger for *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* remains a personal one, 'une exigence de mémoire immédiate' (BA 11), which then evolves into an explicit examination of the events and people that betrayed the revolution. Careful to distinguish her approach from others, 'D'autres écrivent "sur" l'Algérie...' (BA 260), she simultaneously testifies against the revolutionary brothers and negotiates with her dead. The taut style of her writing suits the content of topics painful both on a personal and a collective level. To mourn her dead and Algeria's descent into chaos, Djébar crafts a new language for a literary embalment--a white one as the title

¹⁷ Djébar, 'Territoire des langues', 18.

suggests, washed clean of literary extravaganza, bleached free of lies and cover-ups, and intentionally resembling the white shroud traditionally wrapped around the dead in a Muslim burial.

Part of Djébar's negotiation with her dead involves the creations of a 'récit scrupuleux' that details what happened the day her friends were murdered (BA 12). She describes her project as follows:

Je ne polémique pas; ni non plus ne pratique l'exercice de déploration littéraire. Le plus simplement possible (et, pour certains, après enquête auprès de quelques proches) je rétablis le récit des jours--avec parfois des signes naïfs, des présages--à l'approche du trépas.

(BA 11)

As in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, once again the narrative self is absent from the events that form the core of the narrative, and therefore, the narrator depends on other people's recollections: 'moi, la lointaine, presque l'étrangère, l'errante en tout cas la muette dans la séparation' (BA 59-60). The narrator in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* collects eyewitness accounts, and in a gesture similar to that of a journalist, acknowledges these in an Afterword: 'Je tiens à remercier quelques amis dont les témoignages m'ont permis d'évoquer des scènes auxquelles je n'ai pas été présente' (BA 280). In contrast to Cixous's practice, Djébar neither makes explicit the differences between the versions, nor does she include a description of the process of collecting this testimony. She assumes the position of an intercessor; she tells their stories, because they cannot.¹⁸

¹⁸ For a discussion of the term intercessor, see Zimra's 'Disorienting the Subject in Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*' *Yale French Studies: Another Look, Another Woman: Retranslations of French Feminism*, no. 87 (1995), 149-172.

It is possible to argue that it is superfluous for Djébar to describe the deaths of her friends when so many others have lost friends, mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, daughters and sons in the conflict. Certainly other Algerians have wondered about her silence on the events in Algeria. In reply to such criticisms, Djébar writes: 'Un tel enchaînement de la violence, et son accélération aveugle, accentuent certes la vanité du dire, mais aussi sa nécessité' (BA 271). The question then becomes, *what* can one say? In *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* Djébar chooses to recount her friends' deaths and thus to evoke their lives. She reconstitutes the events of the day of their death, the signs, and imagines the victim: the dead come back to life and thus remain real, present and unforgotten through the act of writing. Calle-Gruber describe this as 'de sorte que le récit biographique, en maintenant l'illusion de la vie, en vient à faire vivre/revivre la mort--à perpétuité'.¹⁹ Djébar moreover animates the death (and the dead) for the reader and also gives expression to the pain of the survivors.

If the narrator in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* interrogates her mother and brother for the details of the son's death, then in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* the dead speak directly to the narrator, and, importantly, they speak in French. Her deceased friends haunt her: the dead appear in her Californian hotel room 'en cercle au-dessus de mon lit' (BA 19), and in the middle of a Parisian boulevard 'au milieu des survivants' (BA 17). Uncertain that the dead are 'at rest', 'Ils dorment vraiment là-bas?' (BA 18), she continues to speak to them: 'Heureusement, ils me parlent souvent, ces "chers". Ce *dear* que je pourrais leur dire dorénavant, sans fausse pudeur, en arabe, mon arabe à moi, aux dentales écrasées' (Italics in text, BA 18). As we have seen, the question of language is a critical one in the Djébarian corpus, and here for the first time English ('dear') provides a bridge between French ('chers') and Arabic. The language the dead speak is equally significant. The first section of *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* is

¹⁹ Calle-Gruber, *Assia Djébar ou la résistance de l'écriture: regards d'un écrivain d'Algérie* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2001), 113.

entitled 'La langue des morts' (BA 14), which suggests the persistence of a 'souffle post-mortem'.²⁰ In *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, the narrator speaks to her friends in a liberated French, 'nous parlons pleinement en français' that contrasts with the French spoken to her friends in life 'faute de mieux, par neutralité' (BA 16,15). It is notable that Djébar refers, in this context, to French as neutral, while elsewhere (in *L'Amour, la fantasia*) she considers French to be the enemy's language. Whilst her friends were alive, it was Arabic that contained class and gender associations: for example, she once spoke in Arabic to Alloula only to instinctively sense that 'conversant en arabe ensemble, nous devenions, par excès, moi une bourgeoise des temps anciens, et lui, un villageois rude et fruste!' (BA 16). Djébar demonstrates the approximate, unsatisfactory nature of language: if French transcends not only the societal gender divide that complicates friendships between men and women but also class differences and even death, it remains the language of oppression, impossible for friendship, love or affection. Additionally, this implies that Arabic was unusable as a literary and personal language, despite it being the mother tongue of all the interlocutors, for speaking Arabic exposed too much of both Alloula and Djébar.

As Gafaiti points out the most important absence in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* is an 'absence of expression' in the public sphere;²¹ in other words, as the Algerian author Arezki Mellal describes it, the collective outpouring of rage and grief that meets ETA's bombings in Spain does not occur in Algeria, and many note an indifference and a 'mutisme' present in Algerian society.²² Algerian women's aphasia have long been the departure points for Djébar's writing: from *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* onwards, the transcription of others' stories, and specifically, their voices and silences is the hallmark of Djébar's writing, conference papers and films--a strategy that initially intended to come close to ('parler près de') but also to counteract ('tout contre') the absence of women's expression. *Le Blanc de*

²⁰ Calle-Gruber, *Assia Djébar*, 112.

²¹ Gafaiti, 'The Blood', 821.

²² Catherine Bedarida, 'Arezki Mellal, romancier de l'Algérie vraie', *Le Monde*, 13 March 2002.

l'Algérie expands Djébar's long-standing sensitivity to gender issues in order to signal the silence present in the cultural realm, which stifled dialogue between Djébar and other writers: 'Déplorer plutôt l'impossible du dialogue d'hier entre nous, le noeud invisible qui déviait notre parole entrecroisée, le voile-suaire qui me faisait rentrer devant chacun de vous mes élans' (BA 21). The 'voile-suaire' with its echoes of death and ghosts, since, a 'suaire' can be used to mean not only a 'linceul' for wrapping the dead's bodies but also a 'linceul blanc avec lequel on se représente les revenants, les fantômes',²³ muffles the 'dialogue d'hier' (BA 21). Moreover, the silence Djébar signals persists in the relations between Algerian writers: 'Une femme et un homme en Algérie, écrivain chacun de surcroît, qu'est-ce qu'il se disent? Ils auraient tant à se dire et justement, pour cela, ils ne se disent rien!' (BA 166). In this way, it is not only the narrator's absence from her friends' death or their funerals that is important, but also the absence of expression in Algeria's cultural sphere.

Unlike most witnesses, such as the Holocaust witnesses, participants and perpetrators filmed in *Sboah*, the narrative self in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* and *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* is witness to 'an event to which the self was not witness': in other words, Cixous was absent from her son's deathbed just as she was indirectly implicated in the Holocaust; Djébar was not present when assassins murdered her friends just as she was in Paris and Tunis during the French-Algerian war. And yet, through an archaeological-like process of collecting the Other's memories (the narrator's mother, the eyewitness account by a victim's daughter etc.) the texts propose a reading of the past, a way of bearing witness by writing biographical accounts, whether of the self or of the other, enabled precisely because the narrative self was absent. This adds a new dimension to the notion of testimony, and in Djébar's instance, re-works *témoignage* as a critical approach to history. In other words, if an eyewitness 'tells the truth', i.e. 'I was there. I saw it', then in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* and *Le Jour*

²³ *Le Petit Robert*, s.v. 'linceul'.

où je n'étais pas là, the narrators hear about what happened: 'I was not there, I did not see, I heard'. The author then becomes she who transcribes the story but also a participant in the textual journey of recuperating the past. If the narrators' absence from the death of their loved ones provides the trigger for the narrative, then the impelling motive for the narrator's subsequent journey is a desire to shatter the silence surrounding the past which, after all, contains the roots of present conflicts.

Questioning historical and political narratives

'Peut-être le rôle de l'écrivain est simplement de témoigner quelquefois de blessures' stated Assia Djebar in a recent interview, and indeed, the departure point for *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* and *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* are autobiographical events--'blessures'--, as we have seen above, and from these events follows the authors' project of bearing witness or probing historical events, which will concern us below.²⁴ For Cixous, this entails an indirect, oblique approach through metaphors and references that evoke the French- Algerian war and the Holocaust. Djebar prowls through the archives of recent Algerian history, taking with her a figurative camera and notepad, to reveal the infighting that in her view characterised and blemished the dawn of the Algerian state. In a notable difference between the authors' use of testimony, Cixous's approach to historical events is circumspect, while with regard to personal ones she can be forthright, even brutal with the self, while Djebar directly attacks the mis-representations of history and keeps personal material guarded.

The narrator of *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, like Cixous, is a Jew, born and raised in French Algeria: as a consequence of her race and geographical location, her life and family

²⁴ Djebar, 'Territoire', 32.

was definitively shaped by the French-Algerian war and World War II. Although not mentioned explicitly in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, the French-Algerian war is an implicit presence in the language used to describe personal events: for example, the son's death is 'un événement révolutionnaire' (Back page). In an additional, oblique reference to the war that ended in 1962, the son dies some forty years prior to 1999, so around 1959, during the war years.²⁵ Additionally, the phrase 'abandonnés de la terre' (JN 22), used to describe the narrator and others, emphasises the desertion of the child but also echoes the title of Frantz Fanon's influential study of the French-Algerian War *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961).²⁶ Algeria plays, moreover, an important role as the location of the 'crime' the narrator commits: 'Mes crimes, pensé-je, je les ai tous commis en Algérie. Celui-ci, c'est une faute, et ce n'est pas la mienne' (JN 9). This sentence suggests the narrator's guilt, foreshadows the tribunals that will be a persistent theme in the text, but also evokes the dynamics of the subject caught in a colonial drama. In other words, the narrator committed this 'crime'--abandoning her son--in Algeria, which is an event perhaps pre-determined by the discourses of colonialism, history and politics present on the Algerian stage.

Second, one of the most important themes of *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* is the Holocaust, for it haunts the narrator:

²⁵ Calle-Gruber notes Cixous's son as having died in 1961; see Calle-Gruber, 'Générique', 209.

²⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris: Maspero, 1961).

Je suis une femme qui a toujours des tribunaux dans la tête, tout cela parce que je n'ai pas été déportée, cela ne peut ni se regretter ni ne pas se regretter ni se dire, cela ne peut qu'essayer d'user les épines des roses, essai sempiternel, ma mère non plus n'a pas été déportée, et elle ne se déporte jamais de son chemin tout droit, sans regret et sans regret de regret. Tandis que moi, séparée de la déportation par un pré verdoyant et une mer très bleue j'ai toujours sous le crâne des juges qui m'abandonnent à une cuisante absence de châtement.

(JN 25)

On the one hand, the extensive play on the verb 'déporter' contains a clear reference to the deportation and genocide of the European Jews; spared because of her geographical location, the narrator was left with an uneasy, even guilty feeling: 'une cuisante absence de châtement' hence the 'tribunaux dans la tête' (JN 25). On the other hand, the text uses 'déporter' to describe the narrator's tendency to regret the past as contrasted with her mother's inability to do so. What separates the narrator from deportation is her location on the other side of the 'une mer très bleue'--a reference to the Mediterranean. However, as Cixous's comments at a recent conference suggest, geographical distances certainly does not preclude identification: 'During the second World War, I identified with the Jews'.²⁷ To have survived the Holocaust is for the narrator, as for many other Jews, an ambivalent issue, especially given that the narrator feels she was 'spared' the collective persecution of which she was also a victim in another country, in another context.

And yet, the narrator claims that she never thinks about her son: 'Je ne pense jamais à mon fils le mort' (45). A film triggers the unearthing of her son's death in the narrator's

²⁷ Cixous (untitled paper presented at National Jewish Book Week, London, England 23 April 2002).

unconscious: on her son's birthday, the 1st of May--also Worker's Day--, the narrator watches a film about the trial of Albert Eichmann that took place nearly forty years before, *Un Spécialiste*, and this sparks the process of recovering a personal memory: 'j'y fus surpris par mes morts surtout l'un, un de mes fils, auquel je ne pensais plus jamais, et qui me revint de a à z ce jour-là' (JN 32). Influenced by Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963),²⁸ *Un Spécialiste* is a film composed of approximately 2 hours of footage from the 1961 trial of Albert Eichmann in Jerusalem. What struck Arendt, a witness to the trial who wrote a series of hard-hitting, controversial articles for *The New Yorker* that later became a book, was what she refers to as 'the banality of evil' present in the defendant: Eichmann is, in Arendt's estimation, a man who speaks in clichés, incapable of coming up with an original idea and prone to excessive boasting, and yet, what is most chilling about this insignificant man--a bureaucrat incapable, by his own admission of killing anyone in the flesh--is a singular inability to see the consequences of his actions, and therefore to feel shame or guilt.²⁹

It is perhaps precisely Eichmann's 'thoughtlessness', as signalled by Arendt that makes *Un Spécialiste* for the narrator into 'justement le film qu'on n'a *surtout-pas-envie* de voir qu'on a quand même envie de voir' (JN 31). Clearly the film exercises a blend of horror/fascination in the narrator, and she feels compelled to watch it despite not wanting to see: 'Le destin c'est que nous finissons par faire ce que nous ne voulions *surtout-pas-faire*. Et cela je ne me l'explique pas bien' (JN 31). She sees the film on the birthday of her abandoned son, and this timing alludes to the process--one triggered in this instance by seeing *Un Spécialiste* and the memory of the Holocaust it invokes in the narrator--of moving from the unconscious to the conscious self. Likewise, the narrator describes the day as one

²⁸ See John Erickson, 'Translating the Untranslated: Djébar's *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*', *Research in African Literatures* 30, no. 3 (Fall 1999), 104.

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1962; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 287-288.

in which 'je descendis souvent sous la terre, je remontai de sous la terre' (JN 32). Cixous emphatically does not identify with Eichmann, but she does suggest a tenuous parallel between her thoughtlessness and his, with the significant difference that she feels the consequences of her choice. The film spurs onwards the process of remembering and leads to the written recollection of the forgotten son.

A crucial question at the heart of the trial-like investigation of the narrative self in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* that plagues the narrator is whether she is guilty or innocent. One could ask here guilty or innocent of what? First, there is the narrator's unwilling role in the humiliations of the colonial drama; secondly, there is the narrator's guilt over surviving the Holocaust but also about her geographical distance to it; thirdly, there is the event central to the text, the abandonment of Georges; and fourthly, there is the authors' flight from Algeria. These events, intricately intertwined, raise questions about the authors' responsibility when writing; after all, she does not want to repeat the colonizer's gesture or the "thoughtlessness" of Eichmann. In Eichmann's trial, the outcome was guilty; however, he believed himself innocent, as the narrator's mother points out in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*: 'Ce sont toujours des innocents, Eichmann (...) C'est un type qui trouve tout bien ce qu'il a fait. Tu ne peux pas le convaincre qu'il n'est pas dans son bon droit' (JN 44). To be sure, this appears to be the case and Eichmann's lack of remorse suggests the approximate, unsatisfactory nature of punishment. In contrast to the Eichmanns of the world, the narrative self questions whether anyone, including herself, is ever completely innocent or guilty.

Un Spécialiste interrupts thus an apparently personal, insular narrative and introduces history: here it becomes clear how the Holocaust lurks behind the text in a manner similar to the relationship Djébar traces between today's events and the French-Algerian War in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*. The focus in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* is on the multiple facets of a

narrative self who is victim, bystander and perpetrator. On one level, there is the narrator and her abandoned son; on another, there is the historical abandonment of the Jews. Therefore, abandoning Georges and the attempt to understand (which tends to be an unsatisfactory one) why the subject did what she did, can also be relevant to the painfully complex process of remembering the Holocaust or of understanding the colonial paradigm in French Algeria.

The Spectres of Independence

The inability to see the consequences of one's actions, evidenced by Eichmann, can be echoed in an entire society's amnesia with regard to particularly painful and salient chapters of its past. As much of her oeuvre has shown, in particular *Loin de Médine* and *L'Amour, la fantasia*, Djébar has no scruples about excavating past events; in fact, she has consistently put forth that such a process with its inherent questioning of established discourse is one way forward for Algerian women. With *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, however, the focus shifts: 'Il n'y a donc plus seulement la nuit des femmes' (BA 259). As the preceding quotation implies, 'la nuit de l'Algérie' is now also an inescapable reality for the author. Djébar's strategy is, however, remarkably similar to the one employed for 'la nuit des femmes'--a strategy bent on uncovering the roots of today's events by relentlessly rattling the skeletons in Algeria's past. Djébar's excavation unearths the roots of the violence in today's Algeria, which include not only the coloniser's actions, but also the back-stabbing of the revolutionary "heros" during the French-Algerian War, which has been neither acknowledged nor investigated: the incidents she exposes, most of which have been discreetly whispered about in the past, are ones clearly unflattering to the myths of the Algerian Revolution. As the critic John Erickson argues, drawing on Sartre and Henri

Alleg, the French colonialist mission that resulted in the depersonalisation of the oppressed developed, paradoxically, into Algerian repression of Algerians: in other words, torture begets torturers.³⁰ The novelist Hilary Mantel credits a similar insight to V.S. Naipaul, that 'oppression, he (Naipaul) notices, doesn't make people saintly, it makes them killers; all victims are dangerous'.³¹ Djébar re-opens two emblematic 'closed cases' in official Algerian history: the murder of Abdane Ramdane and the purge of intellectuals by Colonel Jean Amirouche. Both are instances in which the formerly victimised became killers. She does so in order to expose how the consequences of colonialism but also of a revolution tainted by corruption and betrayal led to the present day violence in which intellectuals, who might otherwise best halt the violence through dialogue or exchange, are a consistent target.

Djébar paints the backdrop for the assassination of Abdane Ramdane by recalling that in 1956 Camus intervened in a conference at the 'Cercle du progrès' as crowds hurled stones at the windows of the room and yelled "Camus au poteau!" (BA 126-127). In a quotation repeated several times in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, Camus at the 'Cercle du progrès' stated: 'Si j'avais le pouvoir de donner une voix à la solitude et à l'angoisse de chacun d'entre nous, c'est avec cette voix que je m'adresserais à vous'.³² It is this voice that Djébar claims as her own in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*. 1956 was also the year Guy Mollet, the new president of the *Conseil français*, proved incapable of confronting a small, but increasingly radical group of *pièdes-noirs* and panicky ordered the war effort to be accelerated--the consequences of which would include the arrival of Jacques Massu's paratroopers, fresh from defeat in Indochine, and the systematic use of torture. It was also the year the guillotine began, once again, to perform its gruesome functions at Barberousse in the name of French Law. Every time an Algerian nationalist was executed, the resistance effort in

³⁰ Erickson, 'Translating', 100-106.

³¹ Hilary Mantel, 'Naipaul's Book of the World', Review of *The Writer and the World*, by V.S. Naipaul. *The New York Review of Books* XLXI, no. 16 (October 24, 2002), 10.

³² This is quoted by Djébar in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, 127.

Algiers was doubled—campaigns masterminded by Abane Ramdane (BA 128-130). Ramdane was also an outspoken critic of 'les méthodes brutales et les violences interalgériennes' practiced by the Krim lieutenants, including Colonel Amirouche (BA 132).

In Djebar's account, Boussouf, Mohammed Chérif and Krim Belkacem, fellow revolutionaries, murdered Ramdane principally because of his disaccord with their strategies, which he proclaimed fearlessly, and his willingness to discuss with and work with different factions (BA 138-151). Tricked into travelling to Morocco for a meeting, Ramdane was murdered upon his arrival. Several different versions of the murder have emerged: for example, *El Moudjahid* announced from Tunis on 29 May 1958 'Abdane Ramdane est mort au champ d'honneur!' and Belkacem described the murder as solely the idea of Boussouf. Belkacem spoke at Ramdane's funeral and, in the 1980s the body was exhumed and reburied next to that of Belkacem in a final outrage (BA 149).³³ Djebar refers to this murder as the 'premier spectre de notre indépendance' (BA146) and as an omen of what was to come.

Part of the reason Djebar re-opens this closed file of Algerian history is to elucidate why the *fous de Dieu* (a popular term used to refer to the fundamentalist, militant Islamic groups in Algeria also referred to as 'intégristes') attack the cemeteries where the "war heros" are buried; in short the answer lies with the intermingling of 'héros sublimés et meurtriers fraticides' (BA 150). In a gesture that widens the sweep of *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, Djebar argues that the political unrest today in Algeria, including the rise of the *intégristes* can be attributed in part to the events of 1956-1957, in particular the inter-revolutionary fighting exemplified in Ramdane's murder:

³³ Ibid., 146.

Dans la ville d'Alger qui va aborder l'année 57, la mécanique de la violence et du carnage s'exerce sensiblement selon le même schéma qu'aujourd'hui: d'un côté comme de l'autre, des déclencheurs de la mort--les uns au nom de la légalité, mais avec mercenaires et stipendiaires, les autres, au nom de la justice historique--ou anhistorique, transcendante et donc avec à la fois, des illuminés et des 'démons'. Entre ces deux bords, d'où claquent les armes, d'où sortent les poignards, un champ est ouvert à l'infini où tombent des innocents, beaucoup trop d'humbles gens et un certain nombre d'intellectuels.

(Italics in text, BA 134)

In a reference to the past conflict between the French, who believed they were the incarnation of the law and the Algerians, who appealed to a notion of justice, Djébar claims that the Algerian government and the *intégristes* have reanimated this opposition. Djébar notes, moreover, that in the crossfire between the French and the Algerian revolutionaries the intelligentsia, especially the Francophone one, instantly became suspect: the murder of her friends reveals the persistence, some 40 years later, of this suspicion. The mechanical nature of the violence, implied in the phrase '*déclencheurs de la mort*', impedes the possibility of a response to Camus's words and thus a dialogue: 'Pourtant, ce dialogue qui tente de se continuer aurait pu mener à une Algérie qui, comme ses voisins, approcherait de l'indépendance sans un prix trop sanglant' (BA 127).

Djébar outlines how the intellegensia came to be caught in the crossfire between French and Algerians, in one notable instance, through the manipulation of Colonel Amirouche. He allowed himself to be convinced by the French that all the educated *maquisards*, 3,000 men and women who left their families for the mountains were 'suspect' because they were Francophone. Amirouche subsequently ordered them killed, in effect a linguistic cleansing of the *maquisards*--one of the victims was Djébar's cousin (BA 232-239). Considered a national hero, Colonel Amirouche has both a boulevard and a school named

after him in Algeria today, and his remains are buried at the Carré des martyrs at El-Alia.³⁴ This, suggests Djébar, is the historical precedent to the relentless choice of intellectuals, artists and writers as victims in the conflict between the radical islamists and the government: 'L'écrivain a été obscurément offert en victime propitiatoire: étrange et désespérante découverte!' (BA 12):

Or les bords de la faille se sont entrouverts, sans doute irréversiblement; ils ont emporté dans l'abîme de nombreux intellectuels, les uns les plus audacieux, les autres parmi les plus discrets, et ce, au hasard d'une loterie sanglante.

(BA 271)

Crucially, in Djébar's project as presented in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, she insists on unearthing the reasons, buried in the past, why her friends and other writers have been victims of this relentless 'loterie sanglante': she considers this inquiry to be a pre-requisite to mourning the dead, 'Comment dès lors porter le deuil de nos amis, de nos confrères, sans auparavant avoir cherché à comprendre le pourquoi des funérailles d'hier, celles de l'utopie algérienne?' (BA 275-276). Djébar makes the case, as suggested in her examination of the death of Ramdane and Amirouche that the roots of the present violence in Algeria can be found not only in French Algeria but also in the French-Algerian war. She argues that the dawn of the Algerian state was tarnished, because in less than a month after victory over the French, government troops fired on their own people: in this way, the Algerians unwittingly replicated the violence already endured under the French (BA 275). For example, Djébar decries the government's recent, brutal repression of an uprising in

³⁴ El-Alia is Algeria's largest cemetery.

Barberousse, 'Quelle honte!...Et ceux qui répriment ainsi prétendent incarner la loi' (BA 37) —a repression doubly lamentable because of Barberousse's symbolic value as the prison in which the French executed nationalists 40 years earlier.

The narratives in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* and *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* contest the official versions of the historical events that lurk behind their stories of personal tragedy. Although Cixous does refer to the French-Algerian war, it tends to be in an oblique manner while there is a direct emphasis on World War II and the European Jews. In a noteworthy instance, Djébar draws a parallel between the situation of Jews and Francophone Algerian writers, on the question of language: 'J'ai senti que pour moi dans le français, il y avait du sang dans cette langue. Un peu comme les écrivains juifs, après la Shoah et après la grande guerre, avec la langue allemande'.³⁵ This is significant, because it suggests that there are linguistic links--the blood shed in wars--between a Jewish and a Francophone Algerian writer. The auto/biographical serves, as we have seen, as a springboard for an investigation into the dynamics, often the linguistic ones, of historical events. However, as we will see below, the modalities of the author's inquiry differs: Cixous focuses on the complexities of the narrative self and its relation to itself and the other, while Djébar turns to the relations between writers and the Algerian nation.

Bearing witness to the self: biographical confessions

One of the central preoccupations of *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* involves self-discovery through a confession-like process--both an investigation into the narrative self and what Cixous refers to as 'Jew-being'; she stresses 'the impossibility of defining Jew-beingness' and that 'there is always more than one I, more than one Judaism'.³⁶ According to

³⁵ Djébar, 'Territoire', 25-26.

³⁶ Cixous (untitled paper presented at National Jewish Book Week, London, England 23 April 2002).

Hanrahan: 'Like the 'confessions' she (Cixous) esteems, her autobiographical writing is a study of herself as a version of herself, an exploration of the other she very nearly did not become, the other that by chance she *is*'.³⁷ In other words, in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* Cixous bears witness to the narrative self through writing and events that are important insofar as they shape the subject. Neither the events nor the self are static, as is evidenced in the different versions of how the son died. Instead, *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* contains the 'markers of a fundamentally dynamic subjectivity, an ongoing process of alteration within the self'.³⁸ For this reason, the narrative can be described as a biographical account of the self 'to whom events give rise' instead of the other way around, i.e. the self to whom events happen.

As a result, the self-conscious narrative in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* commits to telling a 'truth' simultaneously acknowledging the flawed nature of any truth and containing a refusal to present the narrative as the Truth:

Je reconnais que je me laisse aller à croire ce qui me plaît. Je reconnais que je préfère me croire que croire mon frère. Et pourtant je reconnais que du point de vue d'un non-moi, le livre par exemple, ce penchant naturel pour moi-même ne garantit pas la solidité du témoignage.

(JN 187)

The 'je' steps outside of itself to assume the position of the 'non-moi, le livre'--a distinction that emphasizes the differences between the narrator and the observed self, the self and the

³⁷ Italics in text, Hanrahan, 'Of Autobiography', 292.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 290.

book. The self-conscious 'je' acknowledges that she prefers to believe her own 'truth' over her brother's. The narrator knows that her reading of her mother and brother's version of events contains 'ce penchant naturel pour moi-même' that makes all testimony suspect (JN 187). An example of this occurs in Felman's reading of *Shoah*, in which she points out that eyewitnesses rarely tell an accurate factual truth of what happens, because by empathizing with the victim they attribute to him/her what they would have done: For example, Polish eyewitnesses remember Jews who were deported as crying 'Jesus, Joseph and Mary!' ³⁹ Additionally, recent studies of refugees and asylum seekers has demonstrated that a subject's story can change as a result of the trauma surrounding the event, in particular the non-essential details, making it appear that they are lying.⁴⁰ By acknowledging that the 'solidité du témoignage' is always tenuous, the narrator obligates the reader to interact with the text, to play a game of sleuth, in which there is no conclusive answer.

The self-consciousness artifice enables the narrator to present events from her life as other to her. Important events from Cixous's life (the oft-recurring descriptions of the death of her father, growing up in Algeria, or her conversations with her mother) are written about as though exterior to the author and the narrator: for example, in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* the narrator is absent from her son's death. Such a method allows her to effectively read these events and assess how what she or her mother and brother can remember and have forgotten meant to the development of the self. As she writes, 'Tout en ce monde et dans les autres dépend de notre lecture' (JN 16). In this way, Cixous's writing enables her to step outside of an autobiographical event, re-discover it in writing: in this way, she is able to 'read it', in other words make sense of it, put it in its proper context, exorcise it perhaps and evaluate its after-effects.⁴¹

³⁹ Felman, *Testimony*, 221.

⁴⁰ See Jane Herlihy, Peter Scragg, and Stuart Turner, 'Discrepancies in Autobiographical Memories--Implications for the Assessment of Asylum Seekers: Repeated Interviews Study' *British Medical Journal* 324, no. 7333 (9 February 2002), 324-328.

⁴¹ Hanrahan 'Of Autobiography', 293.

The *décalage* between the events and the writing of the events forms a necessary part of the process of reading the past:

Mais les choses qui sont arrivées me parviennent si tard, elles mettent quarante ans pour me trouver et que je les trouve, elles se passent longtemps avant que le Livre m'ouvre. Alors j'entre pour la première fois dans l'antique événement. Je suis un être lent à lire

(JN 160)

The phrase above 'le livre m'ouvre...j'entre' suggests that the narrator goes inside herself (JN 217): it also echoes Felman's description of witnesses telling their story: 'the narrator, therefore, is the one who *opens*, or reopens, the story of the past in the present of the telling';⁴² on another level, a biblical reference is present in the phrase 'elles mettent quarante ans pour me trouver et que je les trouve'--40 years being the number of years Moses and the Israelites wandered in the desert. 'Le Livre' also suggests the Bible, accentuating once again the religious aspect. Lastly, the narrator is 'un être lent à lire' --a phrase that suggests that the way in which the narrator approaches her own past is similar to Cixous's critical reading practice.

For the narrative self to forget the 'antique événement' is impossible (JN 160), and the confessional nature of *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* suggests a yearning for forgiveness. Strolling through the park with her mother and sister, the narrator thinks:

⁴² Felman, *Testimony*, 217.

Je vais au Bois augmenter mon livre de jours à ne pas oublier.--Ne pas oublier quoi?--Ne pas oublier: se revenir. Il s'agit de repasser par les mêmes allées, il y a chaque année ce non-miracle miraculeux du recommencement et du rebourgeoisement. C'est la loi. Et pourtant: je n'en reviens pas. Nous constatons que nous sommes encore là. Pas d'oubli dans les allées. Puis il y a eu déchirement du silence murmuré. Les traumas ont commencé.

(JN 17-18)

This dense passage is suggestive of a distant past, perhaps even a medieval period with the reference to Spring and the 'Bois'. Additionally, the 'livre de jours à ne pas oublier' contains an echo of a 'Livre d'Heures', a collection of prayers kept by monks containing elaborate drawings and calligraphy--prayers is also evoked by the phrase 'silence murmuré'. The religious undertone of *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, accentuated by an earlier reference in the same passage to an angel (JN 17), the 'Livre d'Heures', 'allées' as in 'allées d'une église' as well as the phrase 'ce non-miracle miraculeux' are religious allusions, alternatively Jewish and Christian. The narrative self's attempts to not forget, to come back to herself, ("se revenir") by telling the past, and yet, coming back to the present is impossible: 'Et pourtant: je n'en reviens pas. Nous constatons que nous sommes encore là. Pas d'oubli dans les allées' (JN 17).

The narrator's impelling motive to ask her mother for more details, what she refers to as pushing open the doors of the past, is referred to as 'le livre': 'Le livre me pousse à retourner à Alger,' Cixous writes, 'J'en ai assez. Mais le livre ne l'entend pas ainsi' (JN 178, 179). 'Livre' refers not only to the text the reader holds but also to the Bible: 'Mais à peine refermai-je la porte que le livre la rouvre. On ne peut pas imaginer l'autorité d'un livre: c'est

un juge' (JN 188); at the same time, Cixous has stated 'I feel the book is the master of my writing. I describe myself as a scribe'.⁴³ The language to describe the abandonment of the narrator's son is quasi-religious: for example, the narrator has committed a 'faute' and she states, 'Je n'ai sauvé personne' (JN 107) echoing simultaneously the term 'Sauveur' referring to Jesus in Christian religions. On the one hand then, the narrator bears witness to an event of some significance that shaped the self she is today; on the other hand, the language and images are markedly religious—although it would appear not exclusively Jewish—a tendency continued in her latest works as evidenced in their titles and subjects alone, notably *Derrida, Portrait d'un Jeune Saint Juif* and *Rouen, la Trentième Nuit de Mai 31* a play about Jeanne d'Arc.⁴⁴

The strong religious overtones in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* suggest the appropriation and transformation of a particular kind of testimony: what Ursula Tidd refers to as 'commissive testimony'. Testimony as a commissive activity entails the production of biographical and autobiographical material for the other;⁴⁵ in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* others (the mother and the brother) furnish the material but what characterises the story are its lapses and omissions. Tidd argues that commissive testimony is most often present in juridical and religious ritual, preceded by a statement that it is the truth and nothing but the truth; additionally, it is usually given in support of a case being argued and that will then be judged by an authority:

In religious and legal contexts: both parties have specific roles: the authority has to be present or virtually present, and then to pardon, console or punish and the confessing subject to articulate the confession, to receive the judgment of the authority, and to be transformed by the cathartic process.⁴⁶

⁴³ Cixous (untitled paper presented at National Jewish Book Week, London, England 23 April 2002).

At the same conference, Cixous claimed she had always felt 'a tenderness for hesitant Moses'.

⁴⁴ When spoken aloud, this title sounds like 'singe'.

⁴⁵ Ursula Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir: Gender and Testimony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 147.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

In *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là*, there is of course no statement that this is the truth and nothing but the truth; however, the references to Eichmann's trial, to a 'cuisante absence de chatiment', to the event as a 'faute', to 'un juge' or a 'crime' all imply testimony given in a juridical setting, which contains biographical confession. The explicit subject of which is the narrative self; the oblique subject includes the different political discourses that contribute to events such as the Holocaust or French Algeria. Additionally, 'le livre' obliges the telling of the story 'on ne peut pas imaginer l'autorité d'un livre: c'est un juge' (JN 188). Although 'le livre' is an authoritative, judiciary figure and the confessing narrative self does undergo a change, namely the realisation that 'on ne reprend pas l'enfant qu'on a donné' (JN 190), the narrative self undergoes no cathartic process. Indeed, *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* ends with the narrator allowing a door to close, 'J'ai laissé la porte de la Clinique se refermer derrière moi'-- clicking shut the past (JN 190). The process of recovering the past is perhaps liberating for the narrative self, but it is not the cathartic or religious transformation found in a traditional confession: rather, this is a closed door without closure.

Bearing witness for a nation

Holocaust survivors, or other victims of traumatic events, are often torn between a necessity to speak and knowledge that for the listener their stories are unbelievable. For Djébar the murder, the torture and the corruption occurring on a daily basis in Algeria raises the similar question of how to bear witness in writing: 'la vanité du dire, mais aussi sa nécessité' (BA 271). The disappearance of her fellow writers, friends or acquaintances is inseparable from the fading of the Algerian revolution's dreams. For this reason, Djébar

unfurls a memorial procession including the following writers: Albert Camus, Frantz Fanon, Mouloud Feraoun, Jean Amrouche, Jean Sénac, Malek Haddad, Mouloud Mammeri, Kateb Yacine, Anna Gréki, Taos Amrouche, Josie Fanon, Bachir Hadj Ali, Tahar Djaout, Youssef Sebti, Saïd Mekbel, and also an unnamed schoolteacher, who was Djébar's former student. It should be noted that the writers mentioned are all Francophone, although several also wrote in Arabic. Djébar re-animates their deaths, through writing, ensuring that these important figures cannot be forgotten in memory's dusty archives.

The death of authors is also the death of Algeria as Djébar's home: "'chez moi' (du temps, encore récent, où je croyais, quoi qu'il arrive avoir, un "chez moi")' (BA 98). The inability to think of Algeria as her home signals a drastic but not surprising development from *L'Amour, la fantasia*--unsurprising because the deaths of her three close friends lead the narrator to disown Algeria as 'home' and instead to dream of a future Algeria, a movement already begun with her crafting of an imaginary homeland. In *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, commenting on *les événements* and their roots evokes the collective pain of Algerians: it is an angry book, equally as daring as her earlier *Loin de Médine* --because it comments directly on the present situation in Algeria.

In the concluding section of *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, Djébar alludes to the burgeoning testimonial literature on Algeria but distances her writing from it: 'D'autres écrivent "sur" l'Algérie, sur son malheur fertile, sur ses monstres réapparus' (BA 260). Here Djébar places 'sur' in quotation marks in an echo of her famous formulation: 'Ne pas prétendre "parler pour", ou pis "parler sur" à peine parler près de, et si possible tout contre'.⁴⁷ Using similar tactics to the ones she wielded for women, she differentiates her writing from other testimonial accounts, by claiming to write "to" and for the dead: 'Oui, tant d'autres parlent

⁴⁷ Djébar, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (Paris: des femmes, 1980), 4.

de l'Algérie, avec ferveur ou avec colère. Moi, m'adressant à mes disparus et réconfortée par eux, je la rêve' (BA 261). To dream of Algeria is to adopt the pose of a prophet, not wholly unlike the guise assumed by Cixous in 'Le Rire de la méduse', although Djébar is perhaps rightly wary of elaborating a utopian vision, given the failure of the "Revolution" to fulfil its dreams. Instead, she provides two important justifications for bearing witness to the Algerian crisis.

The first justification for testimony is that to relate these events impedes a 'double mort', both the physical death and 'la plongée dans le trou' (BA 96); and the latter is the forgetting that at times underpins Algerian society: 'Poussière de l'oubli qui cautérise, qui affaiblit, et adoucit, et . . . Poussière' (BA 59). The white of Algeria recalls the amnesia of Algerians. To not forget becomes a way to resist the official storyline that underpins Algerian history. However, as Felman writes, 'white is, on the one hand, the colour of the virgin page before writing (...) but also, on the other hand, the very colour of erasure'.⁴⁸ Erickson also notes that Djébar's extensive play on white in the texts belies that she believes writing--ink on the blank page--can counteract erasure, forgetting and silence.⁴⁹

Non. Moi, je dis non. Moi qui, ces trois fois, ai été absente--moi, la lointaine, presque l'étrangère, l'errante en tout cas, la muette dans la séparation, celle qui renia toute déploration, moi, je dis non.

Pas le blanc de l'oubli. De cet oubli-là: oubli de l'oubli même sous les mots des éloges publics (...) Non : car tous ces mots, bruyants, déclamés, attendus, tout ce bruit les gêne, mes trois amis: les empêche, j'en suis sûre, de nous revenir, de nous effleurer, de nous revivifier!

(BA 59-60)

⁴⁸ Felman, *Testimony*, 271.

⁴⁹ Erickson, 'Translating', 95, 106.

This passage suggests, firstly, that Djébar styles herself after her namesake Fatima, described in her earlier texts *Loin de Médine*, as 'Celle qui dit non à Médine'. The favourite daughter of the prophet Mohamed, Fatima refused to accept that her husband, Ali, take a second wife, and later, that she was disinherited upon the death of her father.⁵⁰ As her spiritual daughter, Djébar resists disinheritance of a rich, diverse, multi-lingual and cultural heritage by in her opinion, short-sighted, unyielding and oppressive political discourses. Additionally, this passage signifies Djébar's refusal of the inflated public commemoration of the dead, for example the instances in which those responsible for the deaths, eulogize the deceased. She flatly rejects any ceremony 'je dis non à toutes les cérémonies: celles de l'adieu, celles de la piété, celles du chagrin qui quête sa propre douceur, celles de la consolation' (BA 61). Djébar believes that such ceremonies, particularly if they are hollow ones, enable a premature cauterisation and result in a dangerous erasure of the past.

The second justification for Djébar to bear witness to events is a personal one, stemming from her own distance/proximity to Algeria. On the one hand, by telling the stories of these writers and historical figures, Djébar fulfils a desire to memorialise and to re-open incidents closed in Algerian history; on the other hand, as her question 'Qu'est-ce que je cherche donc, tandis que je fais dérouler cette procession mortuaire?' (BA 162) suggests a personal quest. Indeed, writing about the dead leads to desire for a corporal communion with the dead: 'Le désir me prend, au milieu de cette galerie funèbre, de déposer ma plume ou mon pinceau, et de les rejoindre, eux: de tremper ma face dans leur sang (celui des assassinés)' (BA 162). Interestingly, Djébar sees herself as both a writer and

⁵⁰ Djébar, *Loin de Médine* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991), 68-88.

a painter, with both a "plume" and a "pinceau" as she ardently desires to commune with the dead.

The desire to become one with the past or the dead--and in so doing to not bear the burden of the present--is one also shared with a Pole interviewed in *Shoah*, Phillip Müller, who worked with the disposal of bodies in the concentration camps. One day in the gas chambers, overwhelmed by horror, he stepped in amongst the Jews, ready to die with them. A woman told him to leave, to not to be so foolish as to die with them, that the cause was better served by his bearing witness to what he had seen.⁵¹ Thus, she condemned him to life. In a similar way, Djébar desires to join the dead, '*Les rejoindre, c'est la tentation*' (Italics in text, BA 163): this evokes the difficulty for the subject of remaining among the living, haunted by the memory of the dead and plagued by the burden of witnessing. Indeed at the beginning of *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* she feels severed from those surrounding her: 'Je me trouve au milieu des survivants (...) son coupé, je me sens soudain égarée au milieu des autres' (BA 17), then by investigating the causes, historical ones, behind her friends' deaths, she is able to mourn them and rejoin the living: 'Mais quoi, je guéris! A ma manière, j'oublie' (BA 163). And in this way, she is able to look upon the world instead of focusing only on Algeria: '*L'Algérie est un astre étincelant ou mort, pas tout le firmament!*' (Italic in text, BA 164). Similar to Cixous's non-cathartic closing of the door to her past, Djébar exorcises the demons--rage, grief and despair--that might result in her own annihilation. As a result, she discovers 'la terre entière, les autres pays, les multiples histoires' (BA 163). What the text clearly shares with Cixous's is its self-consciousness, and a sentiment that in writing the text, the author runs a risk to herself, paired with the necessity to tell the story.

⁵¹ Felman, *Testimony*, 278-279.

If *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* transformed the notion of testimony in order to comment on how events, historical and personal, both influence and shape the development of the subject, then *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* argues that writing has an ethical responsibility in the present to the past. Tidd describes a kind of testimony, "expositive testimony", which can be summarised as an attempt to produce multiple truths that lacks the religious or juridical aspect present in commissive testimony: its aim is rather 'to disrupt a univocal, hegemonic, congealed truth'.⁵² This appears close to Djébar's aim, which she furthers by telling "alternative" versions of "closed cases" of Algerian history. Like commissive testimony, expositive testimony depends upon the presence of the reader, but unlike the former, expositive testimony contains no dynamics of power but rather the other (the reader) simply allows the testimonial subject to bear witness.⁵³ Djébar claims, for example, that she addresses the dead: 'D'autres écrivent "sur" l'Algérie, . . . Moi, je me suis simplement retrouvée, dans ces pages, avec quelques amis' (BA 260). Moreover, by testifying through writing in a mostly expository manner, the narrator of *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* gradually works out what Tidd describes as possibilities of agency through her experience.⁵⁴

The final lines of *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* argue that one way forward for Algeria, and also for the narrative subject, is a type of self-examination: 'en s'appliquant à effacer ardemment en soi toutes les fureurs de l'autodévoration collective' (BA 276). The violence of the collective 'autodévoration' present in today's Algeria threatens to render writers speechless with grief; and it is through writing that the writer, 'en quête d'une langue hors les langues' will, find a language capable of replacing the hyperbole of political and historical discourses: 'retrouver un "dedans de la parole" qui, seul, demeure notre patrie féconde' (BA 275-276). The writing subject effaces, within herself, the paralysis that comes from the grief, the hopelessness or horror at the collective 'auto-dévoration' by bearing witness;

⁵² Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 148.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

thus writing becomes a tool to combat historical and political narratives. Ethical responsibility and commitment in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* consists of writing that plays the important role of bearing witness to events, and in so doing, enables the writer to question established discourses.

In light of Djébar's project in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, one could in turn consider the focus in *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* on the subject and its development as navel gazing; or one could argue that Cixous has come full circle to her first texts, concerned as these were with the self and apparently oblivious to surrounding events. One could also suggest that Cixous has veered into a hermeneutic, religious world of metaphor that resembles escapism. Although the preoccupation with the self and how events contributed to its development can make for a claustrophobic reading experience or, at times, alienate the reader, Cixous does recognize the grounds for such criticism and defends her narrative texts, which she distinguishes from her philosophical or 'semi-theoretical' ones, against accusations that these are insular, i.e, without 'political' engagement. Her stance on writing and ethical or moral responsibility is more cautious and oblique than Djébar's. In an interview with Kathleen O'Grady, Cixous claimed that 'tout ce qui dessine, pour nous, l'espace politique visible, n'est que la projection visible et théâtralisée, photographiable, des conflits du moi avec l'autre. Je ne peux même pas imaginer qu'on puisse penser autrement'.⁵⁵ Thus, it is impossible to divide the development of the subject from the political and, as a result, her narrative texts are always necessarily engaged with the political scene. In this way, *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* could be said to be an indirect commentary on a political narrative, one more oblique than that present in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, but also containing a recuperation of the past, both individual and collective. Cixous would perhaps claim that what one remembers and, more importantly at times, what one forgets ultimately makes all the

⁵⁵ Cixous, 'Guardian of Language', interview with Kathleen O'Grady, translated by Eric Prenowitz, *Women's education des femmes* 12, no. 4 (winter 1996-7), 6-10. Excerpts from the original French are available at the following web address: <http://www.english.ucsb.edu/faculty/ayliu/research/grady-cixous-fr.html>

difference for who the narrative self becomes, and that this also holds for a historical, national narrative.

The preoccupation with the border subject as narrator and later as an authorial position is, therefore, put aside in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* and *Le Jour où je n'étais pas là* in favour of a writing strategy in which the presence of the author/narrator/subject is no longer vital: she or he can, although absent, still remain closely connected or entangled with events and thus be a witness able to give or obtain testimony. Cixous and Djébar bear witness to events of autobiographical importance, but these are, in turn, always linked to other historical events that occurred during the participants' lives. This dimension of testimony, which involves an authorial journey from self-obsession to self-effacement, is an exciting development in the authors' oeuvre and underlines their commitment, in different guises, to the political present. Aware of the maxim "those who do not remember the past are doomed to repeat it", the authors surmount their obsession with the border subject, which was a rich source of material for their writing and possibly will remain so, in order to address with lesser and greater degrees of directness, the Algerian present. For Cixous and Djébar writing as testimony counters amnesia, takes a passionate stand against aphasia and is also the culmination of their oeuvres to date: it entails engagement with the real, concrete present--the self, the other and present geo-political discourses. Testimony in Cixous's and Djébar's texts not only re-constructs the burned bridges between the past and the present but also animates a space for dialogue between the past and the present, memory and forgetting, the authorial self and the narrative self, the reader and the text in the aim of contesting hegemonic discourses, political, sexual and historical that have a calculable, devastating impact on Algerians and Algeria.

7

Conclusion

Solidarity and Dreams

J'ai appris à lire, à écrire, à hurler, à vomir, en Algérie. Je sais aujourd'hui par expérience qu'on ne peut pas l'imaginer: ce qu'était l'algériefrançaise (*sic*), il faut l'avoir vécu, subi.

Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune née*¹

To be born of a lost, destroyed country is the border subject's fate. One apparent strategy for coming to terms with the aftershocks of colonialism, which Hélène Cixous and Assia Djebar experienced in *Algérie française*, is to write, but this survival strategy provokes unforeseen consequences for the woman writer. To be sure, multiple languages, cultures and/or origins do not necessarily lead to liberation: if the thematic fabrics of their various texts are frequently woven from the conflicts present at their point of origin--the dynamics of French colonial Algeria--then to write about such tensions also imprisons the author in a perpetual exile. Nonetheless, Djebar's and Cixous's writing effectively denounces patriarchy, colonialism and other oppressive structures, which leads the authors, in turn, to the adoption of a critical position in relation to their own writing, cultures and languages.

¹ Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties', in *La Jeune née* (Paris: 10/18), 128.

Their writing remains woman-oriented, but it also addresses broader issues, such as the re-writing of history, France's amnesia with regard to its colonial past and Algerians' aphasia about the present violence.

What emerges most clearly from a comparative reading of the authors' oeuvre is how the border subject forms the necessary groundwork for the authors' transformation into politically engaged "Algerian" writers. Initially, the border subject assumes the guise of daring, fictional narrators, characterised by their impatience to transgress societal, cultural and linguistic boundaries. Once these narrators plunge across the threshold--a move similar to Cixous's and Djébar's successful coming to writing--the authors design liberating strategies that include women's body. Here the vantage-point of the border subject as an individual between cultures, languages and countries proved invaluable: it enabled the authors to write in a manner that attempted to be inclusive of the other, in specific, other women unable to write, read or circulate outside. By this point Cixous and Djébar occupied privileged positions on the world stage that removed them, and even protected them, from the very kinds of oppression they attacked on behalf of other women. In a surprising repercussion, their liberating strategies--mostly intended to further *other* women's liberation--directly resulted in self-examination: questions of language, origin and belonging suddenly acquired urgency. An autobiographical project does suggest a hermetic world, but Cixous and Djébar's inclusion of history in their semi-autobiographical writing underlined a growing political engagement with Algerian events. Cixous and Djébar re-told events of national and collective significance from their own vantage points and, in this way, demolished official versions of history. Both authors appeared to be more preoccupied with the past than with unfolding events. Bold manoeuvres, such as the direct approaches of 'Le Rire de la méduse' and *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* no longer seemed to be the best tactic: instead, the authors developed strategies more insidious

because more subtle in their subversion of "official historians", politicians, other writers, former colonial powers and so on. Ultimately, Djébar and Cixous adopt a questioning attitude to their own past, to their homelands' past and to the question of women--a standpoint that is crucially aware of the distance between themselves and the other. Their writing began to bear witness to events from which they were absent, which was an approach that effectively enlarged the political reach and implication of their writing.

Much of Cixous's and Djébar's writing clearly exemplifies the possibilities of *métissage* as a reading or writing strategy, or the opportunities of the *new mestiza* to transform her past in a Borderland, but their texts also contain an uneasiness--manifest in guilt, wariness, and crushing responsibility: this is perhaps inherent in inhabiting the new spaces that such reading/writing practices carve out. The destabilisation of the self oftentimes present with bilingualism, which Tzvetan Todorov has identified, must not be ignored: it seems important, for both authors, to make peace with their different languages and to feel that they control and/or create their own, unique writing language that is not "Standard French". Coupled with this is the authors' awareness, born perhaps from the colonial experience, of how much space an authorial voice (similar to the colonizer's) tends to occupy, which can result in the rejection of the other or the event to the fringes. As a result, the border subject as narrator, as liberating optic and lastly as subject lays the groundwork for a new kind of "writing for" or "speaking for ". In particular, testimony enables the authors to short-circuit what Gloria Anzaldúa identifies as the tendency for the formerly oppressed to glorify oppressive traditions as part of a well-meaning effort to revalorise a particular culture or people.

Both Anzaldúa and Françoise Lionnet explicitly valorise the autobiographical as an important ingredient in the composition of new visions of the self and the world, which defy the confines of oppressive systems, such as patriarchy or colonialism. Anzaldúa

practices a kind of semi-theoretical autobiography, while Lionnet listens thoughtfully to autobiographical voices as they emerge in the texts she analyses. Yet for many years it was deeply unpopular--also amongst feminist literary critics--to read a literary work and take into account the authors' biography. Given the too-frequent reduction of the text to the woman, many critics purposefully excluded the biographical in order to correct such imbalances. Commentaries that are more interested in the woman than the writing, especially in Djébar's instance, have impacted not only upon the authors' standing in certain literary forums but also on their writing. And yet, this thesis has shown that the auto/biographical can be crucial to reading Cixous's and Djébar's writing. Highlighting the authors' use of autobiographical events and landscapes, many of which were deeply affected by their gender, enables the investigation of the border subject. For the critic to vault over French colonial Algeria in a reading of Cixous's or Djébar's oeuvre is to miss an important optic into their trajectories.

Part of the justification for reading the authors against each other stemmed from a critical reception that I argued was extra-text. Indeed, as we have seen, much has been made of Djébar being Algerian (or not Algerian enough) and also of her social class. Her writing tends to be relegated to a marginal position, along with other writers whose relevancy to Algeria is perceived by 'insiders' as tenuous, for example the *Union Nationale des Femmes Algériennes* (UNFA) has openly questioned Djébar's social consciousness.² The expectations of North African critics, who remain doggedly disappointed with her early works, led to exhortations that her subsequent works be both more "authentic" and politically engaged. At the same time, Djébar's marginal position has enabled her to take on sensitive subjects, including women's eroticism, the French-Algerian colonial past, and Islam--a luxury unavailable to an "Algerian" writer toeing the official party line. By

² See Farah Ziana, 'Assia Djébar où la littérature marginale' *El Djaïria* 33 (1973), 38.

examining her works in tandem with Cixous's and emphasizing her complicated stance towards feminism (European and Algerian) as elaborated in 'Women of Islam' and *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, I explored the ambivalence and tensions--too frequently simplified--that characterize Djébar's wary relations to both Algerian and to Western feminisms.

If Cixous has attracted much more critical attention than Djébar, then she has also powerfully shaped her own reception. From her writing published close to the turn of the century and immediately afterwards, such as *Hélène Cixous*, *Photos de Racines*, *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage*, 'Mon Algériance', 'Lettre à Zohra Drif', it is possible that Cixous wishes to put behind her the "central" place in French debates, which she occupies in the eyes of Anglo-American critics and to adopt the one of a *Maghrébin* writer. In my reading--the first book-length study of Algeria's role in her writing--Algeria emerges as a central, recurring metaphor, at times an oblique one, present in Cixous's writing: this finds an echo in, for example, a forthcoming issue of the journal *Expressions Maghrébines* 2, no.2 edited by Marta Segarra--one of Cixous's close collaborators--dedicated to the relation between Cixous's writing, *Maghrébin* literature and Algeria. And yet, the burgeoning critical interest in reading her writing in an "Algerian context", one evoked by this journal's call for articles, Cixous's probable willingness to endorse it and her recent interventions at conferences--for example, at a recent conference she stated 'I am African'--can be regarded with slight suspicion.³ Is she mirroring and/or enabling the public French process of recollecting its Algerian wounds? Will she unwittingly opaque other Algerian writers? Will they welcome her? Will Djébar respond and if so how? If to such questions there are no easy answers, then it does seem likely that the authors will strive to remain on the border of both the French or Francophone canon, and also, maintain their remoteness from each other.

³ Hélène Cixous, (untitled paper presented at National Jewish Book Week, London, England 23 April 2002).

The marked distance between Cixous and Djébar appears now as less mystifying: in many ways, the adoption of a critical, marginal position with relation to one's past, history and present events are predicated on a certain distancing from others (writers, countries, languages) in order to maintain and elaborate a new writing space. At the same time, Djébar keenly perceives that to criticize the traditions and events of one's birthplace on the world stage is also to betray, while Cixous makes oblique criticisms, for she remains continually on guard against replicating the colonizing gesture. This difference in the authors' "Algerian-ness"--a real one--is an additional explanation for their reluctance to be linked together. If with regard to literary themes, education and birthplace, they are too close to one another, then in others crucial areas, such as authenticity, passport and religion, they are too far away.

Moving beyond the preoccupations of the border subject, and towards a transformation of testimony into solidarity, Cixous's and Djébar's biographies and the half-century they have traversed alongside an 'Algérie de la douleur' has led to the development of two oeuvres that envision an Algerian future different from the present.⁴ The authors thus enlarge the scope of their writing projects: most recently, their engagement with Algeria's present contains the sketch of a possible solidarity amongst Algerian born writers. Individuals who grew up in French colonial Algeria remember colonialism and know the impossibility of conveying its rituals, circumstances and systems to an audience. As Cixous states in the epigraph above, 'Je sais aujourd'hui par expérience qu'on ne peut pas l'imaginer: ce qu'était l'algériefrançaise (*sic*), il faut l'avoir vécu, subi'.⁵ And yet, in a paper given at a 1993 conference entitled 'Le Cri du monde', which focused on the disintegration of Eastern Europe, Djébar called on Algerian born writers to stop writing about the colonial past of their childhoods and, instead, to write about Algeria in light of the present

⁴ Assia Djébar, *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 275.

⁵ Cixous, 'Sorties', 128.

situation. She claimed, in an instant unique in her writing (including interviews), that 'algerianité', a new kind of Algerian identity, 'rassemblerait aussi bien Derrida à Mohammed Dib, qu'Hélène Cixous à moi-même'.⁶ An Algerian-ness that brings together Cixous and Djébar and encompasses Algeria born Jews (but perhaps not *pieds-noirs* writers) counteracts the colonial compartmentalisation of individuals into racial and religious categories that persists even today. It also suggests that a community of writers, which would be composed of individuals with Algerian links, engaged in a dialogue might be one strategy working towards a cessation of the violence in Algeria: as the travel writer and witness to some twenty-seven revolutions, Ryszard Kapuściński points out, it is the word, the explanatory idea circulating freely, rebelliously that most terrifies tyrants.⁷

Against the background of the tyranny of violence in Algeria during the 1990s, Cixous described her 'Algérieance'--an imaginary word, part Algeria, part France, which both suggests an *alliance* and *résistance*. In 'Mon Algérieance' she explicitly acknowledges Algeria as a departure-point for her writing: this despite how she long ago rejected Algeria, because it rejected her. But, more importantly, a change has now occurred, for Algeria has returned to her.⁸ Cixous has begun, therefore, to write about an Algerian present, although her principle focus remains on the subject. Her reunion with Algeria in writing allows her to surpass the past divisions and schisms that not only made it impossible for her to write about Algeria, but also to be engaged with Algerian events. If she does not share a past with her Algerian sisters, then there is nonetheless room for her alongside them in dreaming a future for Algeria without violence.

Part of the authors' transformation of testimony involves a call for solidarity between Algerian born writers, but the situation on the ground in Algeria, where the vast majority of

⁶ See Djébar, 'Le Blanc de l'Algérie', *Carrefour des Littératures Européennes de Strasbourg* (4-8 November 1993), 7.

⁷ Ryszard Kapuściński, *Shah of Shahs*, translated by William R. Brand and Katarzyna Mrockowska-Brand (London: Quartet Books, 1984), 103.

⁸ See 'Mon Algérieance' *DonnaWomanFemme*, no. 1, no. 41. (January-March 1999), 70-92.

Algerians do not read either Cixous or Djébar, makes it necessary to raise Winifred Woodhull's objection that 'a subversive poetics has gradually replaced work for change in the political field.'⁹ In contrast to Woodhull, both Cixous and Djébar, as well as Françoise Lionnet and Gloria Anzaldúa, believe that subversive poetics does work for a concrete change in the day-to-day political arena; otherwise they would stop writing. At the same time, as Václav Havel recently cautioned:

The warning voices of poets must be carefully listened to and taken very seriously, perhaps even more seriously than the voices of bankers or stockbrokers. But at the same time, we cannot expect that the world--in the hands of poets--will suddenly be transformed into a poem.¹⁰

Amidst the clamours and cries of bankers, stockbrokers, tyrants, fanatics, and criminals the warning voices of poets like Cixous and Djébar are easily overwhelmed. Without overestimating how literature can shape political fields, it is possible to claim that solidarity amongst authors united by a passion for Algeria's and Algerians' struggle will provide an antidote to specific political practices, such as *Arabisation*, bent on stifling a plural cultural, linguistic and literary heritage. Thus, the combination of Cixous's and Djébar's literary voices in a dialogue--one in which each remains distinct--results in a new poetic that draws from both Djébar's and Cixous's writing. Ideas and words that stubbornly call into question existing practices can be difficult for political powers to control--a chorus of such voices might one day become the vital companion to or catalyst for change. Solidarity amongst Algerian born writers reminds Algerians and also the global audience of what risks being forgotten: thus literature becomes an indestructible repository for the dream of a multi-lingual, multi-cultural Algeria.

⁹ Winifred Woodhull, *Transfigurations of the Maghreb: Feminism, Decolonization and Literatures* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993), 10.

¹⁰ Václav Havel, 'A Farewell to Politics', *The New York Review of Books*, XLXI, no. 16 (October 24, 2002), 4.

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