

Algerian Disorders: On Deconstructive Postcolonialism in Cixous and Derrida

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This article explores Hélène Cixous's and Jacques Derrida's explicit revisiting of their Algerian memories, especially in their later work (mainly Reveries of the Wild Woman and Monolingualism of the Other). These texts offer a specifically deconstructive response to the colonial project in Algeria, attempting to think non-appropriative relations to otherness and processes of identification that exceed a self/other binary. Investigating the colonial principle that manifested itself in Algeria from the vantage point of their Judeo-Franco-Maghrebian situatedness, they derive from this position not accounts of cultural particularity, but analyses of (and alternatives to) colonial practices of identification: analyzing colonial and identity politics as harmful to a fundamental relationality to otherness and affirming a "spectral" zone without belonging that nonetheless carves out a life with, toward, and of the other, on the others' sides, relational without being oblivious of antagonisms and violence.

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Modes of life inspire ways of thinking; modes of thinking create ways of living. Life activates thought, and thought affirms life. Of this pre-Socratic unity we no longer have even the slightest idea... —a unity that turns an anecdote of life into an aphorism of thought, and an evaluation of thought into a new perspective on life.

—Gilles Deleuze¹

Of all the cultural wealth I have received, that I have inherited, my Algerian culture has sustained me the most.

—Jacques Derrida²

In 1990, Robert Young was one of the first to note a wider relation between the emergence of poststructuralism and "Algeria"—a term in quotation marks here to

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1 Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence. Essays on a Life* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 66–67.

2 Jacques Derrida, quoted in Mustapha Chérif, *Islam & the West: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 30.

indicate that it denotes a historical force field, a postcolonial symptom, rather than (merely) a territorial or national entity. Young opens his *White Mythologies* by proposing that “[i]f so-called ‘so-called post-structuralism’ is the product of a single historical event, then that moment is probably not May 1968 but rather the Algerian War of Independence—no doubt itself both a symptom and a product.”³ It is significant, he continues, that “Sartre, Althusser, Derrida and Lyotard, among others, were all either born in Algeria or personally involved with the events of the war.”⁴ In order to substantiate this suggestion, Young goes on to quote a long passage from Hélène Cixous’s text “Sorties” in which she draws—among other things—on childhood memories in colonial Algeria. In that text, she writes that she “learned to read, to write, to scream, and to vomit in Algeria,”⁵ where she witnessed the “murder of the Other”:

To have seen “Frenchmen” at the “height” of imperialist blindness, behaving in a country that was inhabited by humans as if it were peopled by nonbeings, born-slaves. I learned everything from this first spectacle: I saw how the white (French), superior, plutocratic, civilized world founded its power on the repression of populations who had suddenly become “invisible.”... Invisible as humans.⁶

Years later, in *Reveries of the Wild Woman*, Cixous revisits in detail her Algerian memories and remarks: “Everything that moves in me everything that gets itself going and runs after, and therefore writing may be traced back to Oran’s doors in the first instance and later to the various doors of Algiers.”⁷ The subtitle of that text, *Primal Scenes*, is significant: as *Reveries of the Wild Woman* explores, it was in large part the exposure to several formative scenes in colonial Algeria that engendered her writing—especially scenes involving doors (epitomized in her writing as “the Gate”) that were closed to her as a German- and French-speaking Jewish-Algerian girl, closed due to a set of historical complications, Anti-Semitism, gender inequalities, and racisms.⁸ Since Young’s first observation, these intimate links between colonial rule in Algeria and the emergence of poststructuralism have been explored, among others, by Pal Ahluwalia and Jane Hiddleston,⁹ and from the longer list of prominent philosophers and writers

3 Robert Young, *White Mythologies. Writing History and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 1.

4 Ibid.

5 Hélène Cixous, “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays” Hélène Cixous and Cathérine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 63–132, 70.

6 Ibid.

7 Hélène Cixous, *Reveries of the Wild Woman. Primal Scenes* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2006 [Fr. 2000]), 26.

8 The subtitle alludes to Freud’s notion of the primal scene (*Urszene*), for Freud the child’s witnessing of parental coitus, first used in the Wolfman case (1914) to analyze the patient’s neurosis as resulting from this witnessing (whether imagined or real) and its repression (see Sigmund Freud, *Zwei Krankengeschichten* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1996), 154–72). Cixous resignifies the notion by pluralizing it, displacing it onto other scenes, and claiming the “stigmata” that result from it not so much as traumatic, but rather as productive of writing and self-formation. See also Hélène Cixous, “From the Scene of the Unconscious to the Scene of History,” *The Future of Literary Theory*, ed. Ralph Cohen (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 1–18.

9 Pal Ahluwalia, *Out of Africa: Post-Structuralism’s Colonial Roots* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), Jane Hiddleston, *Poststructuralism and Postcoloniality. The Anxiety of Theory*

involved with “Algeria,” especially Cixous and Derrida have thematized its echoes in their work.¹⁰

I would like to explore Cixous’s and Derrida’s exposure to “Algeria” here in detail because their explicit revisiting of “Algeria,” especially in their later work, offers, as I want to argue, a specifically deconstructive response to the colonial project, which is worth considering for several reasons. Their Algerian memories are presented by both, as I will show, as intimately linked to the emergence of their ways of thinking. When Derrida, in *Monolingualism of the Other*, insists on the singularity of his experience of Vichy-France-colonized Algeria and simultaneously demonstrates that some of his philosophical notions are closely bound up with that specific situatedness, this raises questions beyond the fact that poststructuralism had some of its many roots in “Algeria.” The operation that Derrida demonstrates in *Monolingualism of the Other*—to which I will turn later in this article—is not only one in which a certain historical situation informed one’s thinking, but one in which the unique experience of concrete politico-historical circumstances fed into the formation of concepts. Derrida and Cixous both stress their situated, corporeal experiences in and of “Algeria,” but also demonstrate how these translate into their theoretical work—work that has to claim, by virtue of its being theoretical, to pertain to issues larger than the personal and individual.¹¹ The question that is raised then is not so much one of poststructuralism’s Algerian roots (in the sense of a genealogy of a “school” of thought, responding to a historical moment), but rather, on the one hand, of the more intimate indebtedness of key figures of poststructuralist thought to the colonial experience, and, on the other, of the broader validity of notions generated (in a however-complex fashion) from “personal” experience. Notions such as writing or *différance* aim to deconstruct central elements of Western metaphysics and phallogocentrism, against the backdrop of concrete experiences of colonial domination. Likewise, the processual, “spectral” quality of identification and subjectivity that is at stake in *Monolingualism* and throughout Cixous’s texts and which I will focus on in this article strives to think

(Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010). On the intersections between postmodernism and post-colonialism, see Ato Quayson, “Postcolonialism and Postmodernism,” *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, eds. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 87–111.

10 Explicitly since the mid-1990s, especially in Jacques Derrida’s *Circumfession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993 [Fr. 1991]) and *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998 [Fr. 1996]); and in Cixous’s *Reveries of the Wild Woman*, her “My Algeriance, in Other Words: to Depart Not to Arrive from Algeria” *Stigmata. Escaping Texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998 [Fr. 1997]), 204–31; “Stigmata, or Job the Dog” *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998 [Fr. 1997]), 243–61; her conversation with Mireille Calle-Gruber in *Rootprints. Memory and Life Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997 [Fr. 1994]), and her recent fiction *Philippines* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011 [Fr. 2009]).

11 Derrida himself raises this when he discusses the formation of Freudian psychoanalysis in *Archive Fever*, noting that in “the classical structure of their concept, a science, a philosophy, a theory, a theorem are or should be *intrinsically* independent of the singular archive of their history. We know well that these things (science, philosophy, theory, etc.) have a history, a rich and complex history that carries them and produces them in a thousand ways. We know well that in diverse and complicated ways, proper names and signatures count. But the structure of the theoretical, philosophical, scientific statement, and even when it concerns history, does not have, should not in principle have, an intrinsic and essential need for the archive, and for what binds the archive in all its forms to some proper name or to some body proper, to some (familial or national) filiation, to covenants, to secrets.” Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 45.

nonappropriative relations to otherness, as a critique of and alternative to colonial appropriation. Escaping the dichotomous self/other binary on which the colonial model rests, a coming into being of an “I” is instead conceptualized within fields of pluralistic differences, colonially hierarchized, yet multidimensional and differentiated. Therefore, we might ask, if some of these conceptual key elements were engendered to certain degrees by “Algeria,” how are they in informative ways already postcolonial? Or put differently: Taking into account their critique directed at Western metaphysics *and* their colonial sites of germination, can we find in them noncolonial alternatives pertinent to broader contexts than immediately historically postcolonial ones? The insights that Cixous and Derrida offer on nonappropriative notions of belonging start from the “Algerian” experience and take this site as intimately formative for their thoughts, but gesture toward a validity for broader contexts than historically colonized (and colonizing) nations. In a sense, we might say that they take the postcolonial beyond the postcolonial, as Glissant takes creolization beyond the Caribbean.¹²

The texts that I will focus on here examine “personal” or “autobiographical” situatedness, but not—as I hope to demonstrate—as straightforward accounts of localizable positions or hitherto neglected stories. They rather offer theories of non-binary and nonappropriative identification. Gil Anidjar rightly notes for Derrida (and in my view this holds equally for Cixous) that his accounts of “Algerian” experiences do not permit “the possibility of localizing him, of claiming or reclaiming him for a postcoloniality, be it Arab, Jewish, African, or other.”¹³ They are therefore not postcolonial, Anidjar suggests, in the sense of giving voice to an account of hitherto marginalized otherness. And as Lynne Huffer remarks in her reading of Derrida’s “nostalgeria,” his turn “toward Judaism in not about... an ethical obligation to remember the particularities of the other”¹⁴—the other here in the sense of a marginalized, othered, disenfranchized collective that is now remembered/remembering. Instead, Derrida and Cixous investigate the colonial principle that manifested itself in “Algeria” from the vantage point of their Judeo-Franco-Maghrebian situatedness and derive from this “spectral” position not accounts of their cultural particularity but analyses of (and alternatives to) colonial practices of identification.

12 I am thinking here of a similar move as the one Édouard Glissant implies with his notions of Relation and creolization (to which Derrida refers in *Monolingualism*, as I will indicate in more detail later). For Glissant, creolization articulates two situations at the same time. It names, on the one hand, the encounters and relations that are historically specific and localized in the Caribbean; on the other hand, it articulates a condition of the world at large at the turn of the twenty-first century. Due to centuries of displacements and migration in the backwash of colonialisms, and intensified entanglements across the globe in the past decades, Glissant sees our contemporary time as marked by a “massive and diffracted confluence of cultures” (Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997], 153) analogous to what occurred in the historically specific context of the Caribbean. Glissant calls this condition of confluence-encounter-becoming (epitomized by the Caribbean, yet active everywhere) Relation. In *Philosophie de la Relation* he specifies Relation as “the realized abundance of all the differences of/in the world, without being able to exclude a single one” (*Philosophie de la Relation. Poésie en Étendue* [Paris: Gallimard, 2009], 42 [translation mine]).

13 Gil Anidjar, “Introduction: ‘Once More, Once More:’ Derrida, the Arab, the Jew,” Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 1–39, 35.

14 Lynne Huffer, “Derrida’s Nostalgeria,” *Algeria & France, 1800–2000. Identity, Memory, Nostalgia*, ed. Patricia M. E. Lorcin (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 228–46, 241. Huffer is critical of this, see note 119.

In order to outline their responses, I want to consider here in an exemplary fashion Cixous's motif of the Gate and Derrida's notion of monolingualism of the other. Even if the Gate at first sight might seem the most binary of motifs, indicator of a clear-cut inclusion/exclusion, of self/other, in Cixous's rendition of it, it has ramifications that far exceed the binary. As we will see, the Gate brings a structure of colonial discrimination and drive to racialized segregation to the point *and* permits Cixous to stress a precarious zone without belonging, a difficult alternative to binary models of identity-construction: wounded yet inhabitable, carving out a life that strives to always look on the many others' sides without being ignorant of antagonistic violence that complicates such zones continuously and often thwarts them. And likewise, although monolingualism might seem to stress language as homogenous and unique, Derrida's crucial addition "of the other" reflects the lasting indebtedness of any position of articulation to otherness *and* crucially, on the basis of this, demands the invention of a habitat. Their deconstructive postcolonialism analyzes colonial and identity politics as harmful to such a fundamental relationality to otherness and devises noncolonial approaches to identification, derived from the Algerian disorders that both experienced in their particular circumstances of "Algeria."

Perverse Historical Complications

In order to fathom the name of "Algeria"—a much broader "force-field" than the Algerian War of Independence, which was, as Young rightly noted, "itself both a symptom and a product"¹⁵—let me briefly sketch those key elements that are especially pertinent to Cixous's and Derrida's writings. Algeria was a French colony (1830–1962) of a unique status. As a settler colony, quickly after the beginning of French conquest in 1830, it was progressively integrated into the French Republic, both administratively and legally. After the revolution of 1848, to demonstrate its commitment to revolutionary values, the Second Republic not only abolished slavery (again), but also transformed the territories of the central Maghreb—the coastal regions Oran, Alger, and Constantine—into *départements français d'Algérie*, thereby making them integral parts of France.¹⁶ This meant, among other things, the extension of French nationality to all inhabitants of these three *départements*, which did, however, not entail citizenship for all.¹⁷ In 1870, the Crémieux decree then gave

15 Young, *White Mythologies*, 1. For the history of the war, see Alistair Horne's classic study *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954–1962* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

16 The fierceness with which the central Maghreb (Algeria) was annexed and seen as France still resonates more than a century later in François Mitterrand's famous statement, as French Minister of the Interior in a radio-broadcast on November 7, 1954, shortly after the start of the War of Independence on November 1, 1954: "L'Algérie, c'est la France" (quoted in Mohammed Ramdani, "Introduction," Jean-François Lyotard, *La guerre des Algériens. Écrits 1956–1963* (Paris: Galilée, 1989, 9–31, 12) and in Jacques Soustelle's address to the Algerian Assembly on February 23, 1955 (as governor general of Algeria): "La France est ici chez elle, ou plutôt l'Algérie et tous ses habitants font partie intégrante de la France une et indivisible. Tel est l'Alpha et l'Omega. Tous doivent savoir... que la France ne quittera pas plus l'Algérie que la Provence ou la Bretagne." (Ibid.) On the history of decolonization in Algeria, see Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization. The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

17 During colonization, the legal and citizenship status of the population of Algeria was carefully divided into various ethnically and religiously specified categories ("Muslim," "Arab," "Indigenous,"

French citizenship to the Jewish population of the *départements français d'Algérie*, as a national compensation for the imminent loss of L'Alsace/Lorraine and a half-hearted move to begin complying with promises of equal citizenship for all residents of French Algeria.¹⁸ The effect was a departmentalization of the native population, which still echoes in Cixous's "My Algeriance," one of Cixous's first essays that explicitly turns to her memories of Algeria. Indicating not only the racialized divisions and hierarchies in French Algeria, but also the in-between position of the Jewish community due to the situation the Crémieux decree had created, she writes that she and her younger brother Pierre were always the "Cixous children those not really Jewish false French odd inadequate people who loved the Algerians who spurned us as enemy Francaouis, Roumis and Jews."¹⁹ Both Cixous and Derrida were born into this "perverse historical complication"²⁰ of French colonialism, which was at a specific moment coupled with Vichy-anti-Semitism—creating a position of simultaneous inclusion/exclusion, of arbitrary displacement, an in-between space that was privileged/disprivileged, depending on the perspective from which it was viewed, as the triple dismissal as Francaouis (as not French Algerian settler enough, but too French), Roumis (as not Arab enough, but too European), and Jews (as not Metropolitan French Christian enough) performs.

Notably, Cixous begins "My Algeriance" by stressing first of all the contingency of having landed in these circumstances. The text opens as follows:

My way of thinking was born with the thought that I could have been born elsewhere, in one of the twenty countries where a living fragment of my maternal family had landed after it blew up on the Nazi minefield. With the thought of chanciness, of the accident, of the fall.²¹

It was the escape from Nazi-German persecution that made her mother Eva Klein leave Osnabrück and brought her to Oran, capital of the western *département français d'Algérie*, where Cixous was born on June 5, 1937, into a Jewish family of German-Ashkenazy descent on her mother's side and Sephardic-Spanish descent on her father's side.²² She grew up speaking German with her mother and grandmother, and French with her father, saying that she inherited her love of language from her father's fondness of language games.²³ "My Algeriance" describes this "obscure feeling of

"Jew," "European," "French"). Full citizenship for the Muslim population was continuously promised and continuously postponed, and only in 1958 did all Algerians become full citizens of France. On Muslim citizenship in French Algeria, see Shepard, *Invention of Decolonization*, 19–54.

18 See Shepard, *Invention of Decolonization*, 28; these laws were complemented in June 1889 by the law of nationalization of all European settlers.

19 Cixous, "My Algeriance," 215. *Roumi* is an Arabic term pejoratively used for "Christian invader" or European. *Francaouis* is a term used by *pieds-noirs* settlers for the French from metropolitan France.

20 Cixous, *Reveries*, 70.

21 Cixous, "My Algeriance," 204.

22 Eva Klein's family was formerly from Alsace, then settled in Osnabrück. George Cixous's family had migrated from Spain through Morocco to Algeria after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain after 1492 (cf. Cixous, *Rootprints*, 182).

23 Cixous, "My Algeriance," 225. Thinking of Oran, she remembers: "In rue d'Arzew... the Pétain Youth brigades marched in vain. I had the language and its subterranean passages. Or rather I had: *My languages*. We played at languages in our house, my parents passed with pleasure and deftness from one

having appeared there by chance, of not belonging to any here by inheritance or descent.”²⁴ Derrida likewise notes the arbitrariness whereby a group of people received (1870), lost (1940), and then regained (1943) French citizenship, making evident precisely the “artifice and precariousness of citizenship”²⁵ and national belonging. For both Cixous and Derrida, the particular vantage point of being Jewish in *Algérie française* thus complicates or thwarts a sense of rootedness. In a conversation with Mustapha Chérif in 2003, Derrida explains in this respect that

[t]he community to which I belonged was cut off in three ways: it was cut off first both from the Arab and the Berber, actually the Maghrebin language and culture; it was also cut off from the French, indeed European, language and culture, which were viewed as distant poles, unrelated to its history; and finally, or to begin with, it was cut off from the Jewish memory, from that history and that language that one must assume to be one’s own, but which at a given moment no longer were.²⁶

Triply cut off, identification with the oppressed Maghrebian cultures of the disenfranchised Arab and Berber communities was as difficult as with French culture as the metropole to which one did not belong, or only belonged in “spectral” ways. “Deep down,” Derrida writes, “I wonder whether one of my first and most imposing figures of spectrality, of spectrality itself, was not France: I mean everything that bore that name.”²⁷ And likewise, the Jewish community of Algeria had become “strangers to Jewish culture,”²⁸ a culture that Derrida describes as increasingly ossified and Christianized in the 1930s to 1950s, where “the ‘bar mitzvah’ was called ‘communion’ and circumcision was named ‘baptism.’”²⁹ Furthermore, as Derrida unravels in a substantial footnote, Algerian Sephardic Judaism was “on *another* other coastline of the Mediterranean”³⁰ in regard to a largely Ashkenazim European Jewry.

In a similar vein, Cixous writes that the impression of not-belonging was coupled with “[a]nother feeling in the shadows: the unshakeable certainty that ‘the Arabs’ were the true offspring of this dusty and perfumed soil.”³¹ Their sense of displacement,

language to the other, the two of them, one from French the other from German, jumping through Spanish and English, one with a bit of Arabic and the other with a bit of Hebrew. When I was ten years old my father gave me at the same time an Arabic teacher and a Hebrew teacher. That translanguistic and loving sport sheltered me from all obligation or vague desire of obedience... to *one* mother-father tongue” (225).

24 Cixous, “My Algeriance,” 205.

25 Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 16. In his autobiographical text *Circumfession* (1991), he equally notes the “chance or arbitrariness of the starting point, irresponsibility even” (50), which he unravels in that text as the coincidence of being born between two brothers who both died at a young age, leaving him—from his mother’s perspective, about whom *Circumfession* is speaking—in a position of “a precious but so vulnerable intruder, one mortal too many, Elie loved in the place of another” (51–52).

26 Quoted in Chérif, *Islam & the West*, 34. Derrida discusses this at length also in *Monolingualism of the Other*, 50–56.

27 Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 42.

28 *Ibid.*, 53.

29 *Ibid.*, 54.

30 *Ibid.*, note 9, 79. For more on Derrida’s work on Judaism and religion, see Anidjar, “Introduction,” 1–39.

31 Cixous, “My Algeriance,” 205.

thus, was not only saturated with the persecution of Jews in the 1930s and 1940s and its effects on Jewish life in Algeria, but at the same time exacerbated by French colonial policies that gave citizenship privileges to the Jewish community and impeded collective solidarity and alliance with the Arab and Berber communities. “My Algeriance” comments on the French divisive legislation and its effects, pointing out that when Napoleon III first offered French citizenship to the indigenous Jews of Algeria in early 1870, only nine hundred accepted it, out of an estimated total population of around thirty-three thousand at the time. The Crémieux decree then attributed French citizenship to the entire Jewish community, even if it

is clear that the Jews were not asking to be French. From this extremely contradictory mix of Empire and Republic, of colonialist integrationist destructive spirit, of good will and profound misunderstanding, arose intercommunal antagonisms that were never extinguished.³²

In this light, Cixous describes the perception of her family as at the same time “false French” in the eyes of the *pied-noirs* and “Roumi” in the eyes of their Arab neighbors. The experiences that resulted from these particular settings are described by both Cixous and Derrida as formative for their work and their elaboration of a response to the colonial project, as I would like to pursue in what follows.

H. C. (Clos Salambier, Algiers)

In the introduction to *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* , which includes “My Algeriance,” Cixous explains the volume’s title by noting that the “stigma is the trace of a nail’s sting. The mark of a pointed object. The stigma is a scar that is difficult to efface.”³³ She goes on to affirm these marks, stating that she is “attached to my engravings, to the stings in my flesh and my mental parchment.”³⁴ The stigma—as lasting, formative, corporeal trace—is different from the trauma, Cixous notes, in that it is “not a sign of destruction, of suffering, of interdiction [but o]n the contrary,... a sign of fertilization, of germination.”³⁵ A wound that is painful, yet also generative. In this vein she revisits, explicitly from *Rootprints* onward, the traces of Algeria in her work. The introduction to *Stigmata* , after affirming the shaping, corporeal trace in the way described, immediately continues by saying that she received her “first stigmata at the age of three exactly in the Garden,”³⁶ referring to the garden of the *Cercle Militaire* in Oran, to which her father was admitted when, in 1939, he became lieutenant-doctor serving the French army in Tunisia. It is one of the crucial scenes on which much of Cixous’s

32 Cixous, “My Algeriance,” 217. In Cixous’s specific case, her paternal family had applied for French citizenship before the Crémieux decree, in 1867, along with only 144 other Jewish families (Ibid.). For population estimates of the Jewish community in Algeria, see also Paula Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1998), 83.

33 Hélène Cixous, “Preface: On Stigmatexts,” *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), xiv.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid. The stigma is thus not a sign of alienation, which resonates with Derrida’s stress of the non-negative basis of identification discussed toward the end of this article.

36 Ibid.

remembrance of Algeria hinges. The *Cercle Militaire* was “a superb garden reserved for the class of officers”³⁷—which, however, instantaneously gave rise to a double scene of inclusion/exclusion, a drama that “struck, wounded, marked, scarred”³⁸ both her father and herself and in which colonial and anti-Semitic discrimination intersected.

Her scene: At age three, H. C. is delighted to be permitted inside the garden, a paradise enclosed by high bars, but has the obscure feeling of not being truly inside, “that the other children do not admit me.”³⁹ “Crouching near the swing I watch them soar very high, I am below, they are blond I am black.”⁴⁰ In an attempt to be accepted and realizing that the children were fond of stamps, she offers to bring them stamps because her family receives many letters from relatives scattered across the globe.

I have all sorts of stamps, South Africa, Australia, USA, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, I know the entire world. From high in the sky a big six-year-old girl spits on my head: Liar! The word is sharpened, it falls on my brow and makes a gash. I vacillate. Lair! says the voice of flint. You have no stamps. Because: all Jews are liars. The crust that stands for the earth retracts from beneath my feet and I grab onto the cord of a swing, pierced by all these unknown words. Jew? Liar? I hear the hate and the verdict.... As if the bars of the garden fence had entered my breast whistling like lances.⁴¹

She calls this one of her first generative wounds: the phantasmatic *Cercle Militaire* became one of the “primitive figures of my Algerian scene”⁴² that have inscribed in her work a constant concern for the volatile co-constitution of inside and outside. “I have the *Cercle Militaire* and its bars under my skin for eternity. Am I inside, am I outside?... This scene which was too big for me has engendered all my literature.”⁴³ It may have gained particular force from its repetition, when in the same year her father is excluded again from the garden to which he had just been admitted—an expulsion that in turn had momentous effects on the family as a whole.

Her father’s scene: Permitted as a French officer into the *Cercle Militaire* in 1939, George Cixous was excluded from it only a year later due to anti-Semitic Vichy legislation. Cixous calls this a “typical phenomenon of colonization: closed circles, clubs, beaches, swimming pools. All reserved for the French. (Jews excluded).”⁴⁴ As a consequence, trying to leave behind Oran and its anti-Semitic humiliations, George Cixous insisted on moving to Algiers as soon as the war was over. In 1946, the family thus moved to Clos Salambier, a predominantly Arab Algiers neighborhood. Cixous describes this decision as a complex “gesture of great freedom on the part

37 Ibid., xv.

38 Cixous, “My Algeriance,” 219.

39 Cixous, “Preface,” xv.

40 Ibid.

41 Cixous, “Preface,” xv–xvi. The resonances between Cixous’s scene and the one Frantz Fanon describes in “The Fact of Blackness” are striking (*Black Skins, White Masks* [London: Pluto Press, 1986], 109–40). Their similarities as well as the differences that Fanon discusses between blackness and Jewishness cannot be examined here, but would warrant a separate study.

42 Cixous, “My Algeriance,” 213.

43 Cixous, “Preface,” xvi.

44 Cixous, “My Algeriance,” 218.

of my father,”⁴⁵ which for her, however, perpetuated the precarious position of inside/outside. The children were not treated with the same distant respect paid to George (a doctor) and Eve Cixous (a midwife), but struggled with the children from the neighborhood, replicating the perverse mixture of colonial racisms and segregation in Algeria. “[T]here was war,” she writes,

cats and rats whole or in pieces flung at one another, a war of child monsters that the adult superpowers turned a blind eye to, supplied with perversity or apparent indifference, but did not directly intervene in; a war on two fronts, on the one hand the war between the boys, same sex against same sex, it must be emphasized for this was among the circumcised, and was a matter of comparing erections, sticks, rods, fists, fingers, balls, pricks, dicks, biceps, and badges; on the other hand the war of the same against the others, where I was mostly on my own sisterless brotherless and friendless.⁴⁶

A war among brothers, kin, compatriots—divisions enforced on the one hand by colonial legislation (the citizenship and language privileges in the legal and educational systems), and on the other hand by economic (dis)privilege, epitomized by the “impossible gate... between us the children with two loaves [of bread] and us the children without loaves.”⁴⁷ With this in mind, Cixous remembers in “My Algeriance” that Clos Salambier was a neighborhood that reiterated the feeling of an existence in-between.

We lived in the Clos Salambier, at the edge of the city, neither inside nor outside. The Clos Salambier was our uninhabitable... one did not live in the Clos Salambier it was not done, the Europeans the French lived in town one lived in Bab El Oued, in Belcourt, rue Michelet, or in the more reputable neighborhoods, El Biar or Hydra but beyond the bd. Bru, no it was not done there was only us and across the street a fallen French count,... a sturdy man who buried the dead cats and dogs that were regularly thrown into our garden to rot.⁴⁸

Additionally, unaware and dying of tuberculosis, George Cixous chose a school for his daughter that “ever since Vichy avoids Jews, the Jewish girls all went to the other school”⁴⁹ and in which she was the only Jewish pupil. The scene of the *Cercle Militaire*, in all its ramifications of permission and expulsion echoed still in this Lycée in Algiers: “In those days in the Lycée, when I entered and I was inside, I was in

45 Ibid., 213.

46 Cixous, *Reveries*, 23. Cixous explores the importance and difference of the gendered experience of “Algeria” throughout *Reveries*, especially via the figure of “the Bike”—a girl’s bicycle that her mother gave to the children, which came to mark the difference between her brother’s and her responses to living in Clos Salambier (see esp. *Reveries*, 11–27).

47 Ibid., 18. Cixous recounts how her grandmother insisted on buying two loaves of bread—one sweet, one salty. It is crucial that Cixous avoids here the syntactically expected phrasing of “us the children with two loaves and them the children without loaves.” Avoiding the antagonism of “us/them,” she instead places “us” twice, for both groups, in line with the thought of inclusion/exclusion that insists on always considering also the other side, to which I turn in a moment.

48 Cixous, “My Algeriance,” 213.

49 Cixous, *Reveries*, 70.

an exacerbated outside,”⁵⁰ coming to understand that “[i]nside and outside change without cease. As soon as there is some future outside enters inside exists there is alliance and return, who is inside who is out... in class I became aware of the shifts.”⁵¹ *Reveries of the Wild Woman* portrays this state of limbo, exemplified on the one hand by her waiting in vain for an invitation to her *piéd noirs* schoolmates’ homes and on the other hand her desire to befriend the three Muslim girls in school—the only other non-French pupils beside her. But “attached to their three presences... I was with them kept at arm’s length by all my ghosts and all the prickly words”⁵²—the racialized social divisions and the wounds inflicted on all sides. Nevertheless, Cixous describes her intense and ultimately frustrated desire to find a way into the country; a painful intimacy-yet-separation for which she coins the portemanteau *inseparab*: “[F]or eighteen years I was truly *inseparab*. I hung onto the fence, I watched at the gate I waited for the message: a face, a door, a smile. In those days passion for that country was what defined me.”⁵³ And although the Lycée precluded her friendship with “Zohra, Samia and Leila”⁵⁴ on the one hand, and with “Françoise”⁵⁵ on the other, there was a strong sense of attachment to the Arab neighbors, a tragic rift among neighbors and empathy with the Arab community and the humiliations it suffered. “We were,” she writes “assailed in the Clos Salambier by those whom we wanted to love, with whom we were lamentably in love, to whom we were attached we thought by kinship and communities of origin.”⁵⁶ As someone susceptible to the pleasures of language herself, Cixous was particularly receptive to the deprivation of language to which her Arab and Berber neighbors were submitted: “One is forever wounded and repulsed by that scene: seeing, with our ears, non-francophone men and women being mutilated and put down, their language rendered futile in the face of the dominant language.”⁵⁷ And despite the privileges that the Crémieux decree had granted the Jewish community of Algeria, the Vichy withdrawal of it made evident that the Jews of Algeria “were like the Arabs identical twins in deprivation.”⁵⁸ From this mesh of complications, a difficult position of nonbelonging resulted, something that Cixous comes to call an *Algerian disorder*.

50 Ibid., 71.

51 Ibid., 86.

52 Ibid., 85. Later, in “Letter to Zohra Drif” (*College Literature* 30.1 (2003): 82–90), Cixous writes: “I called to them in silence and without hope. I was behind the bars of a mad destiny, cooped up with the French my non-fellow creatures, my adversaries, my hands held out toward my kind, on the other side, invisible hands held out to my own tribe who could not see me. For them, surely I was what I was not: a French girl. My ancient desire for them... inaudible. There was no *us*” (87). In a similar vein, we could explore the loving relation to Aïcha, the nanny and household help of the Cixous’s in Algiers that *Reveries* describes. Although on the one hand, Aïcha is the dear, loved surrogate mother to Cixous, she is, on the other hand, also ignorantly misnamed (her real name being Messaouda [*Reveries*, 52–53]), and the Cixous’s never get to visit her at her house or meet her own children. It is a loving relation, yet shot through with “all the ghosts” of colonial Algeria.

53 Cixous, *Reveries*, 51.

54 Ibid., 85.

55 Ibid., 70.

56 Ibid., 24.

57 Hélène Cixous, “Celle qui ne se ferme pas,” *Derrida à Alger: Un regard sur le monde*, ed. Mustapha Chérif (Arles: Actes Sud, 2008), 45–58, 56 (all translations mine).

58 Cixous, “My Algeriance,” 225.

Algeriance

In 1955, a few months after the outbreak of the war, Cixous left the country to study in France, wishing to leave behind the “sort of *Algerian disorder* I used to get in Algeria or that Algeria got to me, that feeling of being possessed by a feeling of dispossession.”⁵⁹ At age nineteen, she “decided to get out of FrenchAlgeria for lack of Algeria.”⁶⁰ The feeling of dispossession, however, was not relieved with the arrival in France. Instead, “My Algeriance” describes how once landed in France “I saw that I would never arrive in France,”⁶¹ at first a disturbing realization.

Until the day I understood there is no harm, only difficulties, in living in the zone without belonging. For a long time I thought it was my Algerian accident that had made me into a passerby. I do not know how and when all this began but it was by “arriving” in France without finding my way or my self that I discovered: the chance of my genealogy and history arranged things in such a way that I would *stay passing*; in an ordinary way for me I am always passing by, in *passance*.⁶²

Her writing, from the first texts onward, responds to this non-negative condition of dispossession, the zone without belonging—a condition that Derrida calls “alienation without alienation,” a constitutive “alienation” that “is neither a lack nor an alienation.”⁶³ The violence and instability of borders—witnessed⁶⁴ as colonial prohibitions, segregations, and anti-Semitic discrimination—and the realization that, as quoted previously, “inside and outside change without cease” give rise to a thought of nonarrival, to a fluidity of identification called *passance* (for which *Algeriance* is just another term). In fact, she notes that one effect of the exposure to the historical circumstances and personal afflictions of which I only pursued a fraction here was that “in the end a certain writing is engendered that does not settle in, it does not inhabit its house.”⁶⁵ In 2005, in a conversation with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, Cixous remarks accordingly that “I have always lived-written in displacements, *the displacement*, the biographical always displaced displacing.”⁶⁶ Her work affirms this condition of *passance*, which is not a lack or a deprivation to be cured, but a zone to be inhabited. In this sense, Cixous claims not to desire arrival, but “*arrivance*, movement, unfinished”⁶⁷—the

59 Cixous, *Reveries*, 7.

60 *Ibid.*, 81.

61 Cixous, “My Algeriance,” 226.

62 *Ibid.*, 227.

63 Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 25. Cixous writes: “I did not lose Algeria, because I never had it, and I never was it. I suffered that it was lost for itself, separated from itself by colonization. If ever I identified it was with its rage at being wounded, amputated, humiliated” (“My Algeriance,” 224).

64 The modes of witnessing that Cixous and Derrida attest to would have to be explored in more detail along the lines of what Bracha L. Ettinger calls “wit(h)nessing” to stress that such acts of witnessing are co-constitutive of the ones observing and the others/scenes observed: a “co-poietic activity” that makes “a borderspace of swerve and encounter emerge... as a creative process that engraves traces revealed/invented in wit(h)ness-in-differentiation” (*The Matrixial Borderspace* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006]), 144).

65 Cixous, “My Algeriance,” 218.

66 Hélène Cixous and Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, *Encounters: Conversations on Life and Writing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 61.

67 Cixous, “My Algeriance,” 227.

stubbornly confident futurity of *J'arrive* (I'm coming, I manage, I succeed, I happen, I arrive). Being in *arrivance* is “to depart (so as) not to arrive from Algeria”;⁶⁸ it means “not having broken with Algeria.”⁶⁹ It is *Algeriance*: a mode that emerges from a scene of multiplied differences and inclusion/exclusions that affirms the processual, ongoing, and perspectival construction of any position, a necessity that revealed itself in the historical force-field of “Algeria,” where a binary of self/other was not adequate to analyze and describe the situation. Cixous’s writing teases out the wounds of this force-field, examines the part they play in generating her life-writing, and works out an approach to identification and articulation that stresses their corporeal, processual, and relational dimensions.

Before moving forward, there are two crucial things to note. First: The life-writing that is engendered is surely not one of straightforward autobiography. Cixous has repeatedly stressed how much she detests autobiography; in *The Book of Promethea* she even claims that “it does not exist.”⁷⁰ And correspondingly, her work has (implicitly and explicitly) undermined conventional conceptions of authorship: in *Encounters*, she notes that the author “as concept of mastery, of unity of enunciation, etc. is meaningless,”⁷¹ and her method of writing as well as the plurivocity of her texts contradict ideas of mastery and unified voice.⁷² When Cixous’s texts say “I”—she insists in *The Book of Promethea*—“this I is never the subject of autobiography... I is the heroine of my fits of rage, my doubts, my passions. I lets itself go.”⁷³ It is—she wrote earlier in “Sorties”—an evocation of “[m]y people: all those that I am,”⁷⁴ a “crystallization of my ultrasubjectivities. I is this exuberant, gay, personal matter, masculine, feminine or other where I enchants, I agonizes me... a concert of personalizations called I.”⁷⁵ It is thus crucial that a reading of her primal scenes, of the Algerian genealogies in/of her writing, is not misunderstood as a quest for the living author behind the texts. Such an endeavor would run counter to everything Cixous’s work tirelessly strives to deconstruct. As Mairead Hanrahan has argued, however, Cixous’s aversion seems “to relate not to the autobiographical enterprise *per se* but to the desire to impose a form on its expression.”⁷⁶ To conform to the literary genre of autobiography: to assume a somehow completed, unified subject outside the text who reflects on her life as if preceding and separate from that text. Forcefully *not* assuming such a subject of writing, she nevertheless takes a set of prominent Algerian scenes as generative material: the “depth(s) my writing draws on almost always without my knowledge... is constituted of a multitude of primitive ‘things’: scenes, affects, traces,

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Hélène Cixous, *The Book of Promethea* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 19.

71 Cixous and Jeannet, *Encounters*, 61.

72 Her texts are dictations, dream-episodes which her hands try to write down as fast as possible (see for example Cixous, *Rootprints*, 98–107). In his book on Cixous, Derrida notes that her writing evokes “figures with six hundred voices... fictional idealities whose ‘as if’ eludes psychoanalytic knowledge and its theoretical questions after having seriously exhausted them” (*H. C. for Life, That Is to Say...* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006], 31).

73 Cixous, *The Book of Promethea*, 19.

74 Cixous, “Sorties,” 72.

75 Ibid., 84.

76 Mairead Hanrahan, “Of Altobiography,” *Paragraph* 23.3 (2000): 282–95, 287.

recurring experiences in my work and in literature in general.”⁷⁷ Thus, on the basis of “personal” experience yet beyond the mere account of an author’s life accidents, one of the things derived from these depths is a situated and radical examination of the colonial principle: of closed circles and segregation, of the intimacy-yet-separation on both ends (French/Arab [which in turn would need to be pluralized]) to which her work responds with the affirmation of a zone without belonging.

Second, and related to the first: The author’s note to *Philippines*—one of Cixous’s recent texts that revisits “Algeria”—ends with an apostrophe to the reader: “*Let’s return to the gate of the first garden: we are always on the other side of bars. Look on the other side. You see?*”⁷⁸ The insight drawn from the spectacle of the first gate—as this address to the reader indicates—not only pertains to the violence of exclusion, but also crucially to the fact that a “we” always entails another side of the bars; that there are always multiple other sides, pluralized, co-constituted related sides to consider (something spectacularly pertinent for “Algeria” with its multiple borders, stakes, communities, and languages). Her understanding (and practice) of writing—specifically under its name *écriture féminine*, which stresses the link between body and language, the invention and experimentation with new modes of desiring/living, of cohabiting with others without appropriating the other⁷⁹—transfigures these insights that stem (partially, obscurely) from the corporeal affectedness of a Hélène Cixous in Oran and Algiers into a notion/practice that not only makes the historical artifice of binaries visible, but that also examines a “we” (and a “self”) as continuously coproduced, emerging from within multifaceted power relations and entanglements. For Derrida, but probably to a certain extent also for herself, Cixous notes accordingly at the colloquium *Derrida à Alger: Un Regard sur le Monde* in 2006: “It’s from the Algerias, in Algeria, from aporia to aporia that he elaborates the principle of his entire profoundly ethical life: to do the least harm possible, to be with the other.”⁸⁰ Taking this as a clue, in a next step I would like to consider Derrida’s indebtedness to “Algeria” and the effects on his thinking—especially on identification as developed in *Monolingualism of the Other*.

J. D. (Ben Aknoun, El Biar, Algiers)

Well known at least since *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida also returned in his later work explicitly to a set of crucial experiences in Algeria of the 1940s, the most important ones being the withdrawal of French citizenship in October 1940 as a result of Vichy-France’s *Status des Juifs*, and his expulsion from school at the beginning of 1942 as a consequence of that. Of the latter, he notes already in *Circumfession*, a few

77 Cixous and Jeannet, *Encounters*, 101.

78 Cixous, *Philippines*, xiii.

79 As sketched especially in Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs* 1.4 (1976): 875–93; performed exemplarily in *The Book of Promethea*. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous writes: “It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist” (883); but also that “writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death... a multiple and inexhaustible course with millions of encounters and transformations of the same into the other and into the in-between...” (883).

80 Cixous, “Celle qui,” 55.

years before *Monolingualism of the Other*: “[T]hey expelled from the Lycée de Ben Aknoun in 1942 a little black and very Arab Jew who understood nothing about it, to whom no one ever gave the slightest reason, neither his parents nor his friends.”⁸¹ In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida then revisits this Algerian scene extensively, and in his conversation with Mustapha Chérif in 2003, he once more recounts it as one of his “earth-shattering experiences”:

I was born a Jew in Algeria, from that part of the community which in 1870 had obtained nationality through the Cremieux Decree, and then lost it in 1940. When I was ten years old, during the Vichy regime, I lost my French citizenship, and for a few years, unable to attend the French school, I was a member of what at the time was called the native Jews, who during those times experienced more support from the Algerians than from what were known as the Algerian French. That was one of the earth-shattering experiences of my existence, one of the earth-shattering Algerian experiences of my existence. There have been others.⁸²

Derrida grew up in the Algiers neighborhood El-Biar, “on the edge of an Arab neighborhood, at one of those hidden frontiers, at once invisible and almost impassable.”⁸³ Second son of a Jewish family that had migrated to the Maghreb originally after the expulsion from Spain in the late fifteenth century, he entered the Lycée Ben Aknoun in El-Biar in 1941. In early 1942, he is banned from it and forced to enroll in the Lycée Émile-Maupas, which Jewish teachers had temporarily set up because they were prohibited from teaching in government schools.⁸⁴ Cixous called this Derrida’s stigma—in reference to her use of the term outlined previously—and she suggests a link to the formation of his thought of deconstruction.

Second stigma 1940.... Imagine FrenchAlgeria at its worst, Vichyified FrenchAlgeria so much more colonialist, racist... What happened in Algeria? Internment camps are set up. Jews are demoted, discharged.... That day, Jacques Derrida is no longer French. He is not Algerian, he is without papers.... He eschews allocations, enclosures, appropriations, disappropriations. Deconstruction has begun.⁸⁵

Two things are made evident by this event of 1940: on the one hand, given and stripped again, by force of law, French citizenship brings to the fore the arbitrariness and artifice of such belonging. On the other hand, the status of “without papers” forces to dwell, for a while, in an in-between of “no longer French... not Algerian.” Derrida

81 Derrida, *Circumfession*, 58.

82 Quoted in Chérif, *Islam & the West*, 29. Among the other (equally spectral) experiences was notably his own circumcision. Derrida affirms the influence it had on this thinking, when, for example, in *Circumfession* he writes, somewhat tongue in cheek: “Circumcision, that’s all I’ve ever talked about, consider the discourse on the limit, margins, marks, marches, etc. the closure, the ring (alliance and gift), the sacrifice, the writing of the body, the pharmakos excluded and cut off” (70).

83 Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 37.

84 Chérif, *Islam & the West*, 108. Cixous recounts a similar scene of her primary school days in a “un-Frenchified Jewish dining-room-school... contain[ing] seven classes” (“My Algeriance,” 225).

85 Cixous, “Celle qui,” 47. She mentions it as the second stigma, calling the first his date of birth (July 15, 1930), one day after the centenary of French colonization in Algeria, celebrated on July 14, 1930.

makes this experience the pivot of *Monolingualism of the Other*, where he notes that he does not doubt that exclusions like the one “from the school reserved for young French citizens... come to leave their mark upon this belonging or non-belonging of language, this affiliation to language”⁸⁶ and his specific thought on identification and cultural belonging that *Monolingualism of the Other* examines. Corresponding to Cixous’s suggestion in the previous quote that deconstruction began with the stigma of 1940—as a mark that can be generative of ways of thinking—Derrida affirms the importance of such “earth-shattering” experiences, “the experience of the mark, the re-mark or the margin.”⁸⁷ It is in such circumstances that a wider structure shows itself, he argues:

[T]here are situations, experiences, and subjects who are, precisely, in a *situation*... to testify exemplarity to them. This exemplarity... allows one to read in a more dazzling, intense, or even traumatic manner the truth of a universal necessity. The structure appears in the experience of the injury, the offense, vengeance, and the lesion. In the experience of terror.⁸⁸

Monolingualism of the Other explores the structure that had appeared in the experience of those injuries—articulating specifically for the relation to a mother tongue what Derrida had developed all along throughout his work with notions such as *différance*, writing, spectrality, margin, or deconstruction. Derrida notes in this relatively late text that what came to interest him in his work—as a however-complicated consequence of these injuries—are phenomena “that blur... boundaries, cross them, and make their historical artifice appear, also their violence...”⁸⁹ After these concerns had been present and effective in his work throughout, *Monolingualism of the Other* explicates more directly the link of such interest—of his theoretical notions, the structure they capture—and their Algerian primal scenes.

Algerian Disorders

Monolingualism of the Other sketches a paradoxical monolingualism whose double condition is that “we only ever speak one language—or rather one idiom only” while “we never speak only one language—or rather there is no pure idiom.”⁹⁰ This structure of articulation, of a certain constitution of subjectivity and identification, became visible at the site of a particular situatedness of “a little black and very Arab Jew” who considered French his mother tongue and yet was denied “Frenchness” in 1942. In conversation with Abdelkebir Khatibi’s *Love in Two Languages*, *Monolingualism of the Other* asserts that the bilingualism which Khatibi delights in in his text is not an option for Derrida. Unlike “French-speaking Maghrebians who are not and have never been French, meaning French citizens”⁹¹—as for example the Moroccan, French-speaking Khatibi—Derrida is both a Maghrebian *and* a French citizen, born Jewish (and hence, post-1870,

86 Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 16–17.

87 *Ibid.*, 27.

88 *Ibid.*, 26.

89 *Ibid.*, 9.

90 *Ibid.*, 8.

91 *Ibid.*, 12.

French) in French Algeria. This rare combination, he stresses, is neither a multiplication nor a fragmentation of identity (a case of being part of this *and* that community, as Khatibi's bilingualism suggests). It is, in fact, "neither monolingual, nor bilingual, nor plurilingual. It was neither one, nor two, nor two + *n*."⁹² Instead, resonating with what Cixous called her "Algerian disorder," Derrida suggests that to "be a Franco-Maghrebian, one 'like myself,' is not... a surfeit or richness of identities, attributes, or names. In the first place, it would rather betray a *disorder of identity*."⁹³ As the text unravels, this disorder hinges on a particular relation to language that became visible exactly in 1940.

In seeming contradiction to this, Derrida starts the text by affirming that he is monolingual, in the sense that the French language is his "absolute habitat... I would not be myself outside it."⁹⁴ It is constitutive and fundamentally formative of the "I" that the text presents—an "I" that refers both to the real Jacques Derrida and to a figure whose genealogical narrative is presented "in parody, as the exemplary Franco-Maghrebian,"⁹⁵ a figure of thought that reflects on subjectivity and identification beyond an empirical existence. On the basis of this initial, fundamental assertion of language as radically intimate and constitutive, the notion of monolingualism is then complicated: it splits into two and as such pertains to the *disorder* of identity previously mentioned. Both dimensions of this monolingualism are crucially "of the other"—although in different senses—and both are tied fundamentally to colonial power.

The first monolingualism is that of French as a mother tongue that stemmed from the metropole, a hegemonic other, "the Capital-City-mother-Fatherland"⁹⁶ on the other side of the Mediterranean. "French was a language supposed to be maternal, but one whose source, norms, rules, and law were situated elsewhere."⁹⁷ But it was also the language spoken in Derrida's family and the endorsed language of French Algeria, where all other languages were marginalized. As an administrative language, Arabic had disappeared and in school it was only an optional "foreign" language among others, after the compulsory Latin and French. Access to any "non-French language of Algeria (literary or dialectal Arabic, Berber, etc.) was *interdicted*"⁹⁸—not outright forbidden because there was the formal possibility to learn it in school (even if this was its only place in public life), but also there in "subtle, peaceful, silent, and liberal ways"⁹⁹ discouraged. French was, thus, in a first sense the monolanguage of the

92 Ibid., 29.

93 Ibid., 14.

94 Ibid., 1.

95 Ibid., 19. And noted previously for Cixous, we have to be equally cautious not to reduce the "demonstration" (Ibid., 72) that Derrida gives of a personal experience to a personal story or the account of an empirical person. Derrida precisely complicates the clear-cut distinction between the personal of unique, historical experience and the general of theoretical insight.

96 Ibid., 41.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid., 31, see also 37.

99 Ibid., 32. Despite the interdiction, Derrida calls Arabic "the language of the neighbor" (Chérif, *Islam & the West*, 33) and the "first of my preferred languages" (Ibid., 34). Elsewhere, he states that he started learning Arabic, although he did not get very far. This might be a good moment to stress again that the notion of monolingualism is not born of the anxiety of not speaking any other languages than French. Derrida spoke many. The point of a "monolingualism of the other" is not one of proficiency in one or more languages, but a conceptual point on the formation of subjectivity and identification.

hegemonic other: it was “that law originating from elsewhere... imposed by the other... through a sovereignty whose essence is always colonial, which tends, repressively and irrepressively, to reduce language to the One, that is to the hegemony of the homogenous.”¹⁰⁰ Even if this homogeneity is fictitious, because shot through with an elsewhere that fissures it necessarily.

Despite being imposed by colonial authority and experienced as a “spectral” mother tongue, the moment of withdrawal of French citizenship was perceived as a dispossession, a wounding inflicting another interdict that in a “different, apparently roundabout, and perverted manner”¹⁰¹ forbid access to French(ness). Contrary to the addition of languages in bilingualism or multilingualism (a structure Derrida called “two + *n*”), he instead underwent a “*double interdict*”¹⁰² that barred him (in different ways, with different stakes) from straightforward identification with both French (as his “mother tongue”) and Arabic (as the predominant native language)—a structure that resembles Cixous’s account of her liminal position in Clos Salambier and the Lycée Fromentin, put in a nutshell by her as: “I survived between the bars.”¹⁰³ It was a position that meant at once being between sides and on both sides of the “traumatizing brutality of what is called the colonial war, colonial cruelty—some, including myself,” Derrida writes, “experienced it from both sides.”¹⁰⁴

A narrative of ownership and self-presence in relation to one’s language or identity had therefore been made impossible because the twofold ban on French/Arabic correspondingly “interdicted access to the identifications that enable the pacified autobiography.”¹⁰⁵ A little earlier, Derrida had described the forms that such “pacified” identifications had taken or could take: On the one hand, the colonial project of the master who “pretend[s] historically, through the rape of a cultural usurpation, which means always essentially colonial, to appropriate it [language] in order to impose it as ‘his own.’”¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, and as a response to the former, the “[l]iberation, emancipation, and revolution [that...] will provide freedom from the first while confirming a heritage by internalizing it, by reappropriating it.”¹⁰⁷ Historically, in Algeria this played out precisely as the enforcement of French during colonization and its reversal in programs of Arabization after political independence.¹⁰⁸ Given that Derrida describes a dispossession of something that had only provisionally been his, that he was exposed to a structure of inclusion/exclusion that made evident the fact that ownership of language is not tenable, these two modes of appropriation were not viable options. Instead, an additional, paradoxical sense of a monolingualism of the other became apparent: that “in any case we speak only one

100 Ibid., 39–40.

101 Ibid., 31.

102 Ibid.

103 Cixous, “Letter to Zohra Drif,” 84.

104 Quoted in Chérif, *Islam & the West*, 35.

105 Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 31. The term *pacified* is far from innocent in Algerian (as in other colonial) contexts. In the case of Algeria, much of the military conquest, especially the battles against the resistance army of Emir Abd Al Qadir (John Ruedy, *Modern Algeria: The Origins and Development of a Nation* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 51–72), was labeled a *pacification*.

106 Ibid., 23.

107 Ibid., 24.

108 See Ruedy, *Modern Algeria*, esp. 80–113, 224–28.

language—and that we do not *own* it... it returns to the other, it exists asymmetrically, always for the other, from the other, kept by the other.”¹⁰⁹ The other in this case is not a hegemonic force, law-giving yet spectral, but a structural other as addressee of any articulation.

What results from this is not only the acknowledgment that “[t]he language called maternal is never purely natural, nor proper,”¹¹⁰ but importantly the affirmation that if what constitutes “me” (as my most intimate habitat, which Derrida stresses as the starting point of his examination) is the language of the other, the mode of identification of such a “me” cannot follow the model effective in the two alternatives of colonial appropriation and emancipatory—postcolonial, we might say—reappropriation. Rather, the crucial insight that Derrida derives from having been exposed to the historical force-field of “Algeria” that showed itself in his earth-shattering experiences is that identification rests on a more paradoxical “structure of alienation without alienation”:

This abiding “alienation” [*aliénation à demeure*] appears, like “lack,” to be constitutive. But it is neither a lack nor an alienation; it lacks nothing that precedes or follows it, in alienates no *ipseity*, no property, and no self... This structure of alienation without alienation, this inalienable alienation, is not only the origin of our responsibility, it also structures the peculiarity [*le propre*] and property of language.¹¹¹

Speaking of alienation as enduring (that is, as not to be sublated) and nonlacking (that is, as not driven by negativity) decidedly sidesteps the framework of a Hegelian self/other dialectic that is still at the bottom of much contemporary identity politics.¹¹² Without ignoring the historical violence that establishes boundaries and aims to solidify them as binary and natural—something that “Algeria” underwent in different ways throughout its violent history and by which both Cixous and Derrida have been marked in the ways sketched here—the understanding of identification that Derrida signals here with his notion of a monolingualism of the other affirms three things at once: first of all, the profoundly constitutive relation to otherness that disturbs the idea of (self-)presence, whether the latter is thought of as lost (alienation) or regained (sublation); secondly, it affirms this relation as asymmetrically of the other, engendering a concern for responsibility rather than appropriation, for differences rather than sameness; and last but not least, it asserts that such a “hauntologically alienated” existence constitutes itself via processes of creolization rather than negativity. Although Derrida speaks of a double interdict of the two languages French and Arab (and by implication also of not being fully French, yet French, while not really Arab, although Algerian), such interdiction is explicitly not conceived of in terms of lack, but as “a paradoxical opportunity,” or as so radical that “I emerge without emerging from it.”¹¹³ Much like Cixous had defined her take on stigmata as signs of

109 Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 40.

110 *Ibid.*, 58.

111 *Ibid.*, 25.

112 Surely, Derrida’s entire work, starting from *Of Grammatology*, is informed by this thought. But it is in his work on “Algeria” that the implications for noncolonial (or post-postcolonial) modes of cultural identification become most directly palpable.

113 Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 53.

germination, the profundity and doubleness of the interdiction of which Derrida speaks gives rise to an existence: to a “hauntologically alienated” dwelling in fundamental and enduring relation to otherness. For, Derrida notes, those from such a doubly interdicted community—taking this as exemplary for a wider insight into formations of subjectivity and identification—have no other choice but to find ways to inhabit the “abiding alienation”:

With whom can we [of a triply dissociated community, bk] still *identify* in order to affirm our own identity and to tell ourselves our own history?... One would have to construct oneself, one would have to be able to *invent oneself* without a model and without an assured addressee.¹¹⁴

Derrida’s insistence on the invention of oneself—on the basis of a fundamental “alienation *without* alienation”—must be read, it seems to me, in light of Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation*, to which Derrida explicitly refers. Responding to the historically specific situation of the Caribbean—with a population radically uprooted and displaced in a plantation economy and the slave trade, African languages and traditions uprooted, and the emergence of Creole culture and language—Glissant, especially in his later work, came to explore Relation as the foundational condition of differentiation and creolization as the corresponding process of Caribbean identification. Under these conditions, due to a confluence of forced diasporic de- and reterritorializations and even despite brutalized and uprooted plantation life, new cultural identifications were invented. Creolization, Glissant stresses, must not be misunderstood as an “amorphic (homogenous) blend in which we are all going to loose ourselves, but a series of astonishing resolutions whose fluid maxim would go like this: ‘I change by exchanging with the other, yet without loosing or deforming myself.’”¹¹⁵ The resonances of Glissant’s use of the term *creolization* are subtle throughout *Monolingualism of the Other*, but when Derrida confirms his own interest in phenomena “that blur... boundaries, cross them, and make their historical artifice appear, also their violence, meaning the relations of force that are concentrated there,” this is, as he stresses, also an interest in “all the stakes of ‘creolization.’”¹¹⁶

Derrida’s references to Glissant mark similar concerns in his own endeavor of monolingualism: to think existence that is radically affected by the colonial project and to think it beyond the indispensable first response of a “reappropriation.” The registers of germination and creolization, of the invention of a habitat in constellations of multiple differences, of spectrality and abiding alienation in relations to otherness, significantly, I would like to suggest, takes the endeavor of a deconstructive post-colonialism in Derrida (but also, as we saw, in Cixous) far beyond an analysis of the historical artifice of binaries, but also beyond the concrete context of French-Algerian Jews. It offers an inquiry of “the interminable and indefinitely phantasmatic process of identification,”¹¹⁷ debunking dialectic conceptions of identity *and* sketching modes of

114 Ibid., 55.

115 Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation*, 66 (translation mine).

116 Ibid., 9.

117 Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 28.

inhabitation that pluralize and spectralize the binary model of self/other. From this angle, Huffer rightly notes that Derrida's account of his "nostalgerie"—and Cixous's *Algeriance*, I would add—forces us to "confront the complexity of those relationships that history and cultural studies all too easily reduce to the binary oppositions of colonizer and colonized, oppressor and victim, conqueror and conquered."¹¹⁸ In this sense, Derrida's turn in *Monolingualism of the Other* toward the Jewish-Algerian experience is not about "the particularities of the other,"¹¹⁹ as an account of Jewish-Algerian reality, a remembrance of the untold story of a cultural particularity. It rather takes a historical and deeply personal specificity—that of being Jewish in French Algeria in the 1940s—as the starting point to analyze a paradoxical structure of cultural belonging that crystallized in those circumstances. It ventures to think the necessary and instable/stabilizing formation of a habitat under the condition that "[t] here is no possible habitat without the difference of this exile and this nostalgia."¹²⁰ It affirms—like Cixous and with Cixous—a zone without belonging, which nevertheless (or precisely because it rests on no "naturalized" belonging) carves out a life with, toward, and of the other, on the others' sides, relational without being oblivious of antagonisms and violence. Their deconstructive postcolonialism examines the historical artifice of colonial structures and devises nonappropriative, noncolonial approaches to identification that are derived from their Algerian disorders.

118 Huffer, "Derrida's Nostalgeria," 232.

119 Ibid., 241. Huffer finds this problematic because it eschews in her view the political stakes of particularity and its cultural memory. Focusing on Derrida's use of "nostalgeria," Huffer notes that despite ironic detachment from a (reactionary) nostalgic position vis-à-vis Algeria, this "does not remove him entirely from the colonizer position, nor does it free him from the nostalgic ideological structures that *Monolingualism of the Other*... claim[s] to dismantle" (238). Instead, "[w]ith 'nostalgeria,' the elitist Derrida myth can be conveniently rewritten as a subaltern myth about Derrida as a postcolonial subject" (244). According to my reading, "nostalgeria" holds a somewhat different position in Derrida's text than Huffer suggests. It expresses a "dream," Derrida notes, of a relation to the language of the (colonizing) other that were to enable one to inscribe oneself in that language, "the desire to make it arrive here... forcing the language then to speak... in another way... keeping in her body the ineffaceable archive of this event" (51–52) of having been forced upon Algeria. But Derrida also stresses—very much in line with the argument of *Monolingualism of the Other* as I have tried to outline it here, and also in conjunction with Cixous—that such a dream is "only a first circle of generality" (52) and foreclosed to anyone in the situation of a double interdiction. From the latter, he then derives the "paradoxical opportunity" (53) of identification that I outlined. A more nuanced reading of "nostalgeria" from this angle exceeds the scope of the present article.

120 Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 58.