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Abstract

Review of Brigitte Weltman-Aron. *Algerian Imprints. Ethical Space in the Works of Assia Djebar and Hélène Cixous*. New York: Columbia UP, 2015. xx+207 pp.

Keywords

Assia Djebar, Helene Cixous, Algeria, Ethics, Francophone Women

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In this bold and original study, Brigitte Weltman-Aron examines the works of Assia Djebar and Hélène Cixous, two groundbreaking female writers, both of whom grew up in French Algeria. Weltman-Aron's analysis is original in that it focuses on the affinity between the two authors and the correspondences that exist between their works. Indeed, Weltman-Aron demonstrates how, by means of various literary devices, Djebar and Cixous offer reflections upon and reconfigurations of their country while also positing assessments of the meaning and nature of personal boundaries and feelings of disconnectedness. The study is equally bold in that it emphasizes how both authors' poetics use concepts such as separation, deprivation, and uprootedness as a vital opportunity to ethically rethink the act of living both in Algeria and beyond. Weltman-Aron argues that while Djebar questions the feasibility of belonging, Cixous refers to eradication and expulsion as the primal condition into which she was born. The title *Algerian Imprints* thus may refer to the imprints that Algeria's troubled colonial history has left on the authors' lives. It may also refer to the political and ethical imprints that Djebar and Cixous are making in response to their common experience of being and feeling estranged from Algeria. Weltman-Aron contends that the authors' dissentient re-configurations of their country are intended to unsettle Manicheism, to creatively address loss and disruption, and to construct perspectives that embrace diversity and encourage the inclusion of more explicitly female experiences and female-centric perspectives in national narratives.

The study is presented in three sections and each part is comprised of two chapters. In part one, entitled "Colonial Demarcations," the first chapter focuses on Cixous's and Djebar's reflections on the structural and organizational realities of the female body politic in colonial Algeria. By writing the body through political tensions and contradictions, Weltman-Aron remarks, the authors confront dislocation and fragmentation and create innovative ethical modes of inhabiting the space, the latter often represented in the form of a circle. The second chapter analyzes the authors' revealing, often painful, experience of attending school in French Algeria. The authors' examinations and interpretations of the school's space ultimately inspire the questioning of both the historical function of colonial archives and the meaning of justice more broadly. Weltman-Aron observes how, while both authors relate the experiences and the consequences of having been exposed to a violent and painful dichotomized world, they also perceive and present this world as a contradictory space that will eventually help them to decode the many layers of banishment and hostility and to question this world's ethical legitimacy. At times Djebar is able to create forms of inclusion. These communities are often shifting and unstable but they are depicted as places of belonging nonetheless. Cixous, on

the other hand, because of her Jewish descent, challenges the entire notion of inclusion and, at times, presents the possibility of belonging as destined to fail and, at other times, as a merciless delusion.

In part two, entitled the “Poetics of Language,” Weltman-Aron delves into Djébar’s and Cixous’s respective, often similar, reasons for addressing dispossession and for elaborating a language of writing removed from the mother tongue. Chapters three and four are dedicated to Djébar’s poetics of the trace and Cixous’s notion of language as hospitality. Weltman-Aron delineates Djébar’s dynamics between erasure and the process of chronicling the historical past through remnants. Her poetics of the trace gives the author the opportunity to express alterity in the language and to comment upon the colonial expropriation of memory and the impossibility of its complete recovery. Djébar’s use of multilingualism, according to Weltman-Aron, is thus conducive to her exploration of borders and margins and to the diverse ways in which to inhabit them. As an Algerian Jew living in French Algeria, Cixous further problematizes the possibility of a mother tongue and develops a language informed by her reflections on both loss and ghostly returns. The alternative space that her inventive writing creates emerges from the body and becomes an incarnation of both disappearance and presence. Characterized by the porous and unstable borders between life and death, Cixous’ hospitable language, Weltman-Aron maintains, portrays this discontinuity as the starting point to envisioning differential forms of cohabitation with both the self and the other in the process of understanding loss.

“Algerian War,” the third part of the book, focuses on the authors’ respective accounts of the war for independence. According to Weltman-Aron, both Djébar and Cixous question the reductionist approach to notions of hostility and peace as stable and identifiable realities. Steering clear of voyeuristic or sensational interpretations of the war, Djébar underscores the uniqueness of each conflict while exploring its legacy with previous occurrences of enmity. While the recovery of women’s first-person accounts is central to Djébar’s work, her approach is multifold. She allows for the emergence of testimonials in a safe, supportive fictional context that also welcomes silence and absence, and she proposes a variety of ways in which to experience and learn about and from history. These methods challenge historical inertia and bring attention to the significance of listening. Cixous’s understanding of war consists in elaborating new articulations of it that reach beyond illusory reconciliatory positions. Weltman-Aron persuasively follows the author’s development of the concept of hospitality: initially experienced as an impossibility, Cixous later reappraises hospitality as an ethical concern that simultaneously embraces diversity and separation on the basis of respect. Once reconsidered as a space characterized by both respect and the lack of ego, separation can thus function as language and as shared discourse that surpasses the mutual conflicting projections over a shared land. Weltman-Aron brilliantly concludes by

disclosing a further conjunction between Djébar and Cixous: their “epistemology of nonseeing” in which the trope of the veil, which is commonly associated with the dynamic between the visible and the invisible, is also considered to be representative of societal fear towards women’s astute powers of perception and discernment (132).

Cogently structured and skillfully supported by influential theoretical sources, *Algerian Imprints* is a substantive work that will prove to be a valuable resource for scholars in the field of gender studies, postcolonialism, francophone literature, and enthusiasts alike.

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