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## Crypts of Hélène Cixous's Past

### Abstract

Through a reading of Cixous's *Inside* (1986), *Or: Les lettres de mon père* (1997), *Reveries of the Wild Woman* (2006) and *Si Près* (2007), this article explores the diverse allegories of "enclosure" in the figure of the crypt containing Cixous's father. Part of the allegory entails a process of mourning not only for the defunct father but for Algeria as well where he is encrypted. The crypt (father's cave or tomb) as the place and the process of writing imposes the de-cryption of the secret cavities of Cixous's texts where she is enclosed, inside the father's cave, in the cavity of his tuberculous lungs, the imagined site from where she writes. The essay focuses on how, with the passage of time, the rapport with the dead father evolves in Cixous's work and how the figuration of Algeria linked to the disease and death of the father undergoes transformations. The father is described in great detail in *Inside* and *Or, Les lettres de mon père*. However in these two early texts, Cixous invents a majestic father incarnating the Law and phallogocentric power as opposed to his condition of a Jew during the Vichy regime, which banned him from practicing his profession and left him powerless. But Cixous never recurs specifically to either identitarian (Jewish) or political (Vichy and Algeria) values. I assert in this essay that it will not be until her later texts that the father's tuberculosis becomes a foreshadowing of a Jewish condition in occupied Algeria during the Vichy period.

### Keywords

Cixous, Les lettres de mon père, Inside, Reveries of the Wild Woman, Si Près, allegories of enclosure, enclosure, crypt, father, Algeria, cave, tomb, passage of time, time, phallogocentric, Vichy regime, jew, jewish

## Crypts of Hélène Cixous's Past

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My life begins with graves. They go beyond the individual, the singularity. I see a sort of genealogy of graves. When I was little, it seemed to me that the grave of my father came out of that grave of the north. My father's grave is also a lost grave. It is in Algeria. No one ever goes there any more or will ever. (Cixous *Rootprints* 188)

The work of Hélène Cixous<sup>1</sup> might be compared to a long “missive to the dead” that shelters the unforgotten in a secret crypt honoring Ghandi, Celan, Mandelstram, Dostoevsky, Lispector, Freud, Shakespeare and others. Her most recent book is a dialogue with the dead, among whom two spectral presences inform the book's title, *Si Près* ‘So Close:’ her beloved friend Jacques Derrida and her beloved father, Georges Cixous, who died in Algiers in 1948.

The father, a Sephardic Jew, is the first of the unforgotten that Cixous attempts to rescue from the jaws of oblivion. He, who endured the humiliation of the Vichy regime in Algeria, is the silent guardian angel of her books. She presents four figures of the father in *Rootprints* that haunt her oeuvre: the predominant figure is that of the just or saintly man whose ethical nature transcends religious affiliation. The father, despite his secular leanings, embodies for Cixous and her brother the Tablets of Mosaic Law. “I began by dismissing God, whose uselessness was only too apparent, and replaced him with my father” (Cixous *Inside* 11). In a second figuration, the patriarchal severity is mollified by humor and a verbal suppleness—he is the enchanter of words. The final two figures are in tandem, since the father, both physician and infirmed patient,

embodies both the subject and object of his profession, a duality that I will discuss at length in this essay.

The rapport with the dead father evolves in Cixous's books, notably between *Inside* and *Or: Les lettres de mon père* 'Or: Letters from my Father.' *Inside* evokes an anguish, a cloistering and the *jouissance* of deliverance. It is a contradictory space wherein the narrator fashions the phantoms of her "fathers," in which she identifies or substitutes herself for the father in an unending language game. The borders of the book's spaces become progressively more narrow: starting from the outside of Algeria, they recede to the interior of the house in Algiers, to the bedroom where the sick man is resting, to the imaginary crypt containing the coffin within which the narrator inserts herself, inside the father. In the name of the father, Cixous pens her relationship to the defunct patriarch, to the symbolic father in his tomb, for it is always the father who, in performing the symbolic function, "dictates":

**One begins wanting to write before the father**, before the symbolic father, before the absent father. It is not a question of the real father, but rather before the dead and therefore ideal father, so as to please him . . . . *Inside* was necessarily written inside the father, in search of him even in his death and returning . . . . It was in some sense inside and outside the tomb of my father . . . . in a resistance to loss. (Cixous "Scène" 18-19, emphasis in text)<sup>2</sup>

This paternal tomb resurfaces in *Or: Les lettres de mon père*, but in the form of "*cartombe*"—a neologism to describe the cardboard box in which the father's letters were found—or "errant coffin" (*Or* 31-32) in which these letters to the mother miraculously reappeared forty years later in the brother's basement. In this text, which is more biographical<sup>3</sup> than her others (though for Cixous all biographies or autobiographies "tell one story in place of another" [*Rootprints* 179]) it is now a question of resuscitating the father, of confronting him in his reality before his death through the letters the narrator refuses to read so as not to dethrone the fictive father: "I lived forty years with my own private father, reserved for myself, recreated, decomposed . . . (32) I tremble between two fathers . . . (34) Outside! We left the cave where we had lived forty years ago rubbing our eyes, afraid,

you in your white robe me awake startled" (*Or* 78). She instead constructs the fictive father for herself in what Freud calls the "family romance," origin of the modern novel according to Marthe Robert. In *Or*, we penetrate the father's interior. But despite the resistance to loss and the will to reparation, "in search of him (the father) even in his death and returning," Cixous, in the father's company, manages an exit from the "cave" in which she enclosed herself in order to reside in the closed space of the book, "inside the father" ("Scène" 18). This cryptic exit imposes the de-cryption of the secret cavities of the text where the father's illness is described in every detail, but without recurring to either identitarian (Jewish) or political (Vichy and Algeria) values. It will not be until a later text, *Reveries of the Wild Woman*, that the father's tuberculosis becomes a foreshadowing of a Jewish condition in Algeria during the Vichy period.

After leaving Algeria<sup>4</sup> in 1954, Hélène Cixous returned to the country of her birth for periodic short visits until 1971 when her mother was definitively expelled for being the owner of a French passport. And it is only in 1993 that she makes a conscious decision to no longer "obstruct the Algeria Thing" (*Si près* 23) repressed from childhood, by integrating it into her work. Her dream of returning to Algeria produces a temporal telescope between the symbolic (mythical) versus historical temporality: the symbolic temporality of what Cixous called her "Chose Algérie" 'Algeria Thing' is opposed to the real and chronological time of history. The temporality of her "Chose Algérie" belongs to the unconscious. In Freud's language "Das Ding" (the Thing) is the "absolute other" of the subject, the "prehistorical Other" only represented on an unconscious level and also linked to the prehistorical Father. The "Algeria Thing" is the return to the father, therefore to the Law and to the symbolic power of the phallus as other. Then, in 2005, responding to an invitation from an old Algerian classmate—Zohra Drif—who went on to become a political figure, Cixous undertook the voyage back, despite her mother's objections when the daughter announces that she wishes "to go see her father's tomb." The mother responded, "the cemetery has no need of you" (*Si près* 51-52). This return reveals itself as an internal combat, a memory quest and an incurable suffering that Cixous calls "malgeria,"<sup>5</sup> (a neologism combining Algeria with "mal," meaning illness, searing pain and/or evil). The "Algeria

Thing” involves a reflection on her own Franco-Judeo-Maghrebian identity and on the political implications that will permanently link her name to Jacques Derrida and his polemical positions regarding what he calls modern Algeria’s “neo-colonialism” (Scharfman 89). Derrida employs this term to indict what he sees as a resurgence of the racist-nationalist ideology of the ex-colonizers, the imposition of a homogeneous monoculture, as well as the intensification of terrorism that occurred since 1992 when the government cancelled elections to prevent the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) from coming to power. It resulted in the murder of thousands of Algerian Arabs and Berbers and the exodus of thousands more seeking refuge in France primarily (89). This Algeria will remind both Cixous and Derrida of the violence and oppression of the Vichy regime, the status of Jews in Algeria between 1940 and 1943, the virulence of anti-Semitism, and their common past so often evoked over the course of forty years: “We do mirror a number of precise and dated stigmata: Algeria 1940. ... expulsions, naturalizations, de/citizenships, exinclusions, blacklistings, doors slammed in your face ... that constitute the archives of what he calls my ‘nostalgia’ and what I call my ‘algeriance’ ... my doctor father’s nameplate yanked off the wall by Vichy” (Cixous *Portrait* 5). This awakening to Algeria is stimulated by the recent work of historians in France since the 1990s<sup>6</sup> on French colonialism and the condition of Algerian Jews in Vichy. Cixous descends into the crypts of the past in search of her native country.

With the passage of time, the image of Algeria undergoes transformations in Cixous’s books such as in *Vivre l’orange*, ‘To Live the Orange,’ which appeared ten years after *Inside*, and in *Rootprints*. The image is later deployed in a more painful fashion in ‘Pieds nus’ ‘Bare feet,’ ‘My Algeriance’ and *Reveries of the Wild Woman*. These last two texts revive the site of memory. But in these texts the space of memory takes on a new dimension. Now it has inflicted the stigmata of a wound that is continually open and never to heal for as long as the desired return is impeded by Algiers’s closed doors. These doors enclose the father’s agony, arrest his “*inseparab*” (Cixous *Reveries* 24)<sup>7</sup> Jewishness by demarcating the impossible encounter of Arabs and Jews, an impossibility that was nonetheless still a possibility when the father was alive. These doors ferment anti-

Semitic hatred, the Vichy syndrome, and alter Cixous's long-held hope to penetrate Algeria's interior. The metonymic constellation of Algeria that Cixous sets into motion contains a tomb that encloses the father in symbolic triangulation of confinement: Algeria, the tomb, the father: "the tomb of my father, that is to say my father by metonymy, or the metonymy of my father ..." (*Si près* 51). Algeria, destitute by the ill of the French occupation (1830-1962) as well as by the algesia contracted during the Vichy regime (1940-1944) of which the father is victim, is superimposed on the figure of the ill-stricken father whose malady is confused with the one contaminating the country itself. The death of the father therefore strikes a double blow, and the unfinished mourning awaiting completion is for Georges Cixous's Algeria.

### Cryptic enclave: primal scenes

I believe that one cannot begin to advance down the path of the discovery of writing unless she begins with mourning and within the reparation of a mourning. The origin of the gesture of writing is tied to the experience of disappearance, to the feeling of having lost the key to the world, to having been thrown out. ... We must become apprentices of Mortality. (Cixous "Scène" 19)

Writing about Algeria, then, is above all the completion of unfinished mourning for the father, a messenger calling her to return to her native land after a forty-year slumber. Writing on Algeria is the pretext for a sojourn on the father's tomb. She writes, "the tomb is a source" (Cixous *Indiade* 251). This return to the paternal source brings her back to the French language that was taught to her by Georges Cixous: "For anyone who has lost everything, whether a being or a country, it is language that becomes a country" ("Scène" 19). She is also returned to her "hispanofrancoarabophone" Sephardic roots ("Corps" 59-83) as well as to Algiers, that city chosen by the father before his demise in 1948:

I left my father there to mix his dust with that dust, a tribute paid to a borrowed land. To leave behind the grave of one's father: through dust I acquire a sort of invisible belonging to a land to

which I am bound by my atoms without nationality. Because of the phantom of my father I cannot be patriated anywhere. An abandonment retains my memory on the unvisited heights of Algiers. ("Algeriance" 154)

Her father's tomb links her intrinsically to Algeria via the implacable obligation to tread upon the hospitable soil that houses the father's remains and by the dreadful feeling of having abandoned him as a "tribute" disguised as a belonging but for which there is no belonging. The phantom of the father comes to haunt her to the point of transporting her anew to that repressed period in time, and though Cixous never felt Algerian, and though she never experienced the loss of an Algeria that was never hers because it was always separated from her, it is as a Jewish woman following the traces of her defunct father that she does finally return in a dream state to Algeria in *Reveries of the Wild Woman*. But in the aftermath of the trauma, the loss of the father replaces the loss of her childhood country that has become, by virtue of a lengthy displacement, the metonymic figure of her writing: the departed father represents the absent fatherland. Cixous, then, forces ajar the door of memory to glimpse the father-land and to oblige differed memory to explore the unexplorable.

In *Reveries of the Wild Woman* Algiers is the final descent where the father falls, the site of his gravestone, and the place where Cixous descends into French Algeria. Algiers is the invisible, the impenetrable, the forbidden or the unknown; it belongs to the "thought from the outside" (Blanchot's expression) which is outside of all pre-hension. Its closed doors and passageways are the image of her "Disalgeria" (*Reveries* 39), as Cixous calls it, that which she was never able to reach as a child and a symptom of her "malgeria." Her brother continuously reminds her, "You never knew Algeria" (*Reveries* 9). And so in a dream Cixous passes through a partially open door to recover the erasure of the memory of words in the murkiness of recollections. Memory, agitating echoes and reminiscences, transport her to the threshold of Algiers in the steps of the dead father. This is the father who transmitted to her his "inseparab" Jewishness and the French language with which she recollects Algiers in order to "honor my father who had been driven out"

("Algeriance" 169). These are questions, then, of honor and ethics. To return to Algeria, to open the doors to Algiers and the gates of Clos-Salembier,<sup>8</sup> an enclave on the outskirts of Algiers where the Cixous family resided from 1946-1956, is to mourn the father, the image of lack that haunts the pages of memory and which figures by its absence Algeria's double. And yet Cixous does not precisely write with memory strictly speaking, but rather with what emerges from the thread of words that speak of Algiers and of the father.

Cixous secretly dreamed of going to Algiers during her Algerian childhood, of entering the city walls by any means possible—a desire to open the condemned doors of Algiers and free herself of her "malgeria" of which she is still suffering the aftermath.

I have got Algeria in my lungs in my throat I don't find it strange that it should turn me hot and cold and bruise my nervous system with its toxic overflow. I attribute the scars of my marked body to the malgerian force of my imagination ... (*Reveries* 64).

This "Algerian malady" (6) is an illness of passion for a country and a realization of having been dispossessed of an irreplaceable treasure: the irreparable loss of a father supplanted by the pages of a missing Algeria. The violence of this ill is all the more severe, since it arises presently in the writing of the body in which the physical symptoms that Cixous evokes resemble the tuberculosis that claimed her father's life.

The social body is itself contaminated by the "malgeria" of anti-Semitism and racism exacerbated by the French presence. This illness is not only deeply rooted in the mentality of some *pièdes noirs*,<sup>9</sup> it is also aggravated by their disdain towards the autochthonous Algerians, towards whom the colonists displace the malady and the responsibility for their own incurable infection. Since the rise of the Vichy in Algeria, the health of the social body depended on an ethnic purging with Arabs and Jews as targets. The high school, the metonymic site par excellence of the French Republic that mistakenly permitted the enrollment of Cixous the Jew,<sup>10</sup> ironically reiterates the allegory of this physical and moral disinfection, an allegory of racial extermination backed by the teaching establishment comprising the upstanding citizens and the dutiful daughters of good

families. In this enclosed space, they rehearse “a plan to efface the Algerian being, carried out in the same way as all comparable plans to efface in all the countries which work to enforce total substitution” (Cixous *Reveries* 70). Here there is no longer any trace of the “malgeria,” since the high school is “excised” of Algeria itself. Now, outside of the majestic high school of ethnic purity reigns the unseemliness and purulence of Clos-Salebier, without which paradoxically Cixous might have been metamorphosed into “a psychically and mentally excised being” (71).

### **Cavity of the social body: historical scenes**

Algiers is a city with a double visage, visible and invisible, of which Clos-Salebier, the pernicious face of Algiers, is the exemplary figure. From the time of the father, Algiers concealed its meanderings; but upon his death the city revealed its sordidness:

And right after that our father died. Overnight the pleasant villa becomes the ravaged township, the besieged city, I never slept again I say, I spent all my nights on the lookout, we lived in the house as in a city promised to destruction ... combat is a thing you inherit ... between the kidzarabs, the assailants on the one hand and three of us ... the hostility is handed down through the ages, during the reign of my father it slept, with him gone it has reawakened, up it rises just as it lay down .... (Cixous *Reveries* 43)

At the time of her father’s death Cixous discovers that the city of Algiers—summit and synecdoche of Algeria itself—is already stricken to its core by an incurable malady. And this festering and contagious wound falls upon the population to the point of striking Cixous’ tubercular father, who perishes when she has just reached the age of ten years old. The malady of Algiers discerned by Cixous is the allegory of the city’s decline at the time of her childhood, where Jews are trapped just as they were in genocidal Europe. But in Algeria it is the Arabs distrustful towards the Jews on one hand, and the French against the Arabs and the Jews on the other. Each against the other:

In the City of Algiers people can no longer refrain from vomiting and spitting, even on themselves ... it's chronic, a morbid habit, a pulmonary fashion, a tongue, a nervous cough, everybody catches it incubates it in their organism transmits it, all in all it's a state of passion .... (*Reveries* 63)

This "malgeria" that Cixous says she has caught in her lungs and throat is a "pulmonary fashion" that reveals itself as a "nervous cough." It infects an Algeria that is vomiting and expectorating the devious ill and afflicts the feverish father—a fever re-experienced by his daughter upon writing the text. The running metaphor is woven into this triangular relation of the ill father, the ill daughter and ill Algeria, a syndrome of colonization exacerbated by the Vichy regime. And yet it is "a malady considered to be in the public interest" that infiltrates all the social layers of the Algerian society, beginning with the shopkeepers, who are the "the mentally deranged" of the streets of Algiers, or the physicians, "sexually and financially obsessed, insomniac," or the professors, "flaccid, drugged, sickly white" (83) after their arrival in Metropolitan France. An ailing humanity populates Algiers—everyone, or almost everyone, who passes through it is contaminated.

Cixous's mother, an Ashkenazi Jew, is the only one who is immunized after having survived the even more contagious illness of Nazi Germany; refusing to see, she does not contract the malady. Cixous and her brother develop the "Algeria malady" during the years of affliction and both of them are fascinated with the unknown Algiers yet pent up in Clos-Salembier. In opposition to the increasing fragility of the tubercular father, the mother remains indifferent to the anti-Arab racist offenses and to the malady spreading around her: "suffering from not suffering stricken with a-madness which is the sickness of those who do not know what sickness is" (*Reveries* 32). Cixous's disorder is a malady of pain for this longed-for Algeria, unreachable despite her ardent desire to enter it. It is "a bodily state" that reveals "the somatization of culpability" as Calle-Gruber calls it (90). But Cixous's state of passion paradoxically leads her to an extreme lucidity: "I suffer from anachrony, a banal, familiar and scary mental illness: the patient is not sick, he suffers the mental anachrony of his entourage ... he alone sees how everything is inside-out,

upside/down, and supposedly rightway up” (*Reveries* 80). A child of another epoch through the violence of the anachronism, she saw what the French failed to see and perceives in the present time the pain of another epoch. Through a temporal telescope the past encounters the Algerian present.

Cixous’s malady of love is in contradistinction to the malady of hatred which spares no quarter. The city of Algiers incubates its malady and also “broods on the eggs of war” (*Reveries* 22) that were brought into the world by Cixous’s mother, a midwife by profession. Insidious Algiers renders each inhabitant a victim, accomplice or guilty party of its syndrome: city under siege, cursed by hatred, inhospitable to an extreme, since it is placed at the bottom of Algeria’s abyss. Cixous narrates a war of malediction and madness. In the hellish hills of Clos-Salembier, on the hills outside of Algiers, at the mouth of the Wild Woman ravine where thousands of miserable souls are packed together without water or dwelling, chronic anti-Semitism and racism abound. Here ethnic and gender wars explode that interpellate Cixous by heritage and destiny.

### Inside or the Father’s Cave

I am in my father’s cave. I am in my father in the cave.  
Now I am seeking to catch my father’s tuberculosis.  
(Cixous *Or* 146)

While Cixous and her brother escape “the plan to efface the Algerian being” (*Reveries* 71) the purging of the Jew, part of the same secret program, condemns with the equal virulence the father: the only “*Inseparab*”—Jew and Arab and therefore doubly reprovved by colonial, fascist France. The gates of Algiers, which held the promise of an opening towards the other, are closed for Georges Cixous along with French Algeria, the French of Vichy and finally the Algerians: it is the enclosure of hatred. The father, “an arabizzare ... is really an Arab beneath the façade of young and dashing French doctor, being Jewish what’s more” (25), creates a link between the Jewish and Arab communities. But upon his death, the link is broken. At the time, Cixous discovers her Jewishness: “I am seven, I’ve been Jewish for some years they tell me” (81). However her identity is struck with interdictions: the word “Jew” under the double blow

of Nazi Germany and Vichy Algeria becomes an unpronounceable taboo. Her existence, then, is cut in two: *Inseparab* of this beloved community, she nevertheless belongs to the historically marked dichotomy by the impossibility of a possible reconciliation: "The most intolerable, above and beyond the battles and humiliations, is that we were assailed in the Clos-Salembier by those whom we wanted to love ... to whom we were attached we thought by kinship and communities of origin ... Me, I thought I am *inseparab*. This is an unlivable relationship with oneself" (*Reveries* 24-25). If Jews acquired a degree of security during colonization, since their presence was officially recognized by the Cremieux decree of 1870, Vichy and its anti-Jewish laws will come along to reinforce this *inseparab* identity that Cixous revindicates against French oppression. "We were not separated, no, we were together in hostility. Gathered together in hostility by hostility. ... bodies united in the clutch of separation" ("Algeriance" 171). The link of "bodies united in the clutch of separation" reinforces this heinous entente that assembles the Jew and the Arab against the contempt of the French. While the French occupiers put everything into place to oppose the Muslim and Jewish communities to each other, the repeal of the Cremieux Decree in 1940, the application of *numerus clausus* and the systematic inferiorization of the Jew paradoxically create a rapprochement with the Muslim who had been denied full citizenship since the beginning of colonization.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless the supreme paradox of Vichy is its flouting of the slogan of the fascist state: "Work, Family, Fatherland." For the so-called "father of the French," Marshall Pétain,<sup>12</sup> while praising the Fatherland, commits a slow parricide with anti-Jewish laws against the figure of Georges Cixous, a crime that allegorizes the situation of the Jew during the Vichy regime. A three-year old Hélène Cixous chants during a parade the nationalist hymn "*Maréchal nous voilà*," 'Field Marshall, here we are,' and innocently hands her father a photo of Field Marshall Pétain. Georges Cixous rips it into a hundred pieces before the eyes of the frightened child (Cixous "Algéries" 157). Cixous's father is a stranger, a foreigner without a fixed belonging since he is a victim of the repeal of the Crémieux decree. He finds himself spit out in this ill country and banished because of his plural identities: French-Jew for the Arabs, Jew-Arab for the

French: "... my father is not French although he may believe he is, my father is an anomaly in the history of this country, ... a piece of detritus spit out rejected by the French" (Cixous *Reveries* 24-25). Outside of death, there is no escape for Georges Cixous. Under the pressures of Algiers regarding Jewish matters, the anti-Semitism of Vichy forces him to quickly renounce his functions as a physician.<sup>13</sup> He will resume these functions later on, but, since he will contract tuberculosis from his patients who suffer from the disease, they will ultimately lead to his demise.

By an allegorical slippage in her writing, tuberculosis—the only designation or epithet the malady of the father receives in *Reveries of the Wild Woman*—gives a concrete form to the ethnic purging of which the father is victim: "The dishonor devours the lungs of the dismissed man. We were thrown out broken degraded dishonored. It is an indelible sensation" (Cixous "Corps" 71). And the contamination that devours him from the inside, from within his pulmonary cavity, evokes the terrible corporal pain and mental infection of the prisoners of the camps, reduced by their suffering to a state of monstrosity: "I sing the cruelty of the pain that makes of the wounded an instant stranger to the two worlds ... to his body which is no longer his own, but rather an uninhabitable monster who bites and leaves him torn apart by unimaginable fangs (119). It is not the hole in the lung that one fears the most, but rather the cavernous tearing of the spirit during the night" (Cixous *Or* 132). The death of the father is Vichy's final solution carried out in French Algeria in order to disinfect the country, to cure it of its ethnic malady. But this death means that the gates of Algiers, once slightly ajar for Cixous, are now slammed shut. Thus is born her "obscure feeling of having appeared there by chance, of not belonging to any here by inheritance ... the unshakeable certainty that the 'Arabs' were the true offspring of this dusty and perfumed soil" ("Algeriance" 153).

And so the death of the father is "a tribute paid to a borrowed land" but precipitates the confinement of the family within the miserable ghetto of Clos-Salembier. Cixous's imprisonment there is like a gesture on the part of the father before his death to better protect her through heightened isolation:

The house was no accident. I was inside because my father had

wanted it ... we had visited the stone belly together, before moving in, then my father had had the garden fenced in, so that we would be safe when he was away, but we had the key of the gate. He had plowed the earth around the cube of stone ... . Then he died. (*Inside* 45)

The description of the house in Algiers reveals the tragedy of her captivity. More sordid than a prison, “the stone belly” takes on the allure of a cryptic construction as if the father built his own mausoleum (“the cube of stone”) before expiring. It is therefore a question of absolute separation from the outside world. And this enclosure with barbed wire placed around the house annihilates Cixous’s hope of one day reaching Algeria. Clos-Salembier becomes the site where one no longer dares to go out without a male companion, without protection, a direct consequence of the machinery of the French occupation and the claustrophobic effect it has on the Algerian inhabitant:

This place called Clos-Salembier on the death of my father became once again the site of multiple and endless expulsions. If only he had known. For what was perhaps possible under the wing of father husband man, which was to go in and out on both sides was utterly out of question for a group that was lacking father husband man and especially in and from the Clos-Salembier. (*Reveries* 35)

The loss of the father is doubled by the loss the city of Algiers, taken away from her at the same time. Death, then, is experienced in a double sense. But if the gate door of Clos-Salembier designates for Cixous supreme imprisonment, a forced withdrawal imposed from within and without, other more impenetrable doorways will close as she attempts to pass through them. And these closed doors in their numerous occurrences generate the “malgeria” that Cixous incubates in Algeria.

For Cixous, Algiers is the city of a hundred closed doors: first of all the Algerian door in the person of Aicha, Cixous’s nanny; then there is the French door of Françoise, the schoolmate who cannot invite Cixous to her house due to her family’s anti-Semitism. Clos-Salembier figures as well a space of no-man’s land, the interstice of

the two multicultural countries in which hermeticism is manifested by these locked doors, an allegory of mental claustrophobia. But the paradox of these ruptures, of the doors which, one after another, are sealed shut, is that Cixous becomes a prisoner of Clos-Salembier by measure of protection against the contagion and the hostility of the outside world. Now, she herself is perceived as a contaminated Jew in the eyes of the Arabs and the French. As a child Cixous rapidly discerns the aporia of the Algerian world, unlike the visually-challenged mother or brother: “I would have liked not to see the beggars, the children in rags, the blind people, the legless cripples but I saw them and I was haunted. The bitter taste of my snack that the little Arab demanded of me and to eat outside without sharing was impossible. But the truth is that I did not share” (“Algeriance” 164). The blood money paid in exchange for occupying this borrowed land is the guilt for the unshared snack, the unoffered gift—the only exchange possible between the Jewish child and the little Arab.

In this enchained country, a vicious circle is unleashed wherein the guilty torment their victims, who in turn become themselves the tormenters of even weaker victims: Algeria’s occupiers siege the Algerians who hold captive at Clos-Salembier the Jews who, caught in a cage, chain their own dog, a veritable contamination of the social body in which hatred is expanded into infamy: “We lock up our own brother, for the Dog it is hell, we ourselves clamp our father’s heir in irons, there is no more law ... the Dog has been betrayed. ... In the Clos-Salembier, ... my heart howled in my cage” (Cixous *Reveries* 45). Each place has in common a space closed in upon itself, a reproduction of the prisons and camps of Nazi Europe; and these spaces imprint themselves in Cixous’s memory like metonymic constellations of an enchained Algeria. These prison-like spaces enclose an ethnia or a nationality: Clos-Salembier enclaves the Jews and the destitute Arabs, and the French high school is a microcosm of French Algeria. But each space is also an antithesis of another within its own exclusions. The spaces that are asphyxiated by malady and suffocating from their enclosure progressively recede in the book of memory. Algeria, desired and longed-for at the beginning is reduced to the city of Algiers, itself circumscribed by the French high school on the one hand and Clos-Salembier on the other, which is transformed into a dog cage, and finally the cave

of the father's corpse where Cixous imprisons herself.

### Deliverance

The gates of Algiers were finally opened upon the departure of the French, but Cixous had already fled to England, and then France in 1954. And the dream of achieving a certain image of Algeria was never accomplished, because only the disfiguration of a sick country brought about by the invaders and Algerian theocracy remains in her memory. "Algeria of my foreboding doomed to the violence that had been sewn there, Enemy of women, I will never return" ("Algeriance" 172). Nevertheless upon the completion of *Reveries of the Wild Woman*, the city still holds the promise of repair, and the nostalgia for Clos-Salembier transfigures, within the space of writing, the site that she so longs to both possess and evade at the time of her childhood: "But now the more I talk about it and the more I go back there especially with my brother the more I feel at home in the Clos-Salembier ... I am at home there now I am no longer chained up" (*Reveries* 95). And the father's Algeria comes back to her, but a new "algeriance" of alliance, an allegiance, yet one that is always in grief, threatened, trembling, situates itself beyond the wars and ethnic suffering: "Algeria addressed me for the first time since I was born, as if we had never left one another ... As if there were something stronger than wars, repression, forgetting, resentment, the centuries of misunderstanding ... which I would call Algeriance" ("Algeriance" 172). She owes to this Algeriance the possibility of living uprootedly since from her father's tomb a symbolic belonging to this borrowed land was paradoxically formed through a homelandless link. Her Algerian experience makes of her a passerby, always ready to take to the road wherever she may reside. And this state of "*passance*" clearly evokes under guise of a national belonging the problematic romantic myth of the "Wandering Jew." The will to remain on the margin of rootedness offers Cixous a belonging which is outside of all belonging. Though Cixous poetizes the freedom acquired through wandering, it is above all her "Algerian accident" (169) that renders her a passerby everywhere and that determines her rejection of nationalism and even more pronounced fear of Zionism.

If the tombstone of the father reconnects her to life to Algeria,

it is also the stone that separates her from Israel: "Zionism appeared to me in 1948 as a figure of tragedy. According to my mother ... my father the socialist, the atheist scalded by Vichy, expelled, expatriated and dead in February 1948 before Israel, was tempted to go to Palestine. The idea of arriving in Israel, the death of my father spared us from having to think about it" ("Algeriance" 170). In fact, no dwelling attracts or retains her, not France any more than Israel. The choice of a country would have extinguished forever the "and afterwards?"—it would have abrogated what Cixous designates "arrivance," an interminable movement within her self-realization that is always differed and comparable to the awaiting of a messianic manifestation. And this "arrivance" from the time of Algeria defers indefinitely her arrival, the act of posing oneself in a space.

To sojourn within a "zone without belonging," that is, one that is without an immutable attachment, permits her to escape the cryptic enclave of the past within the patriarchal enclosure, as though in a "cage" to accomplish an exit towards the outside. And the impossibility of affixing herself wherever she may be, a vocation which was explored in "My Algeriance," permits her to never break entirely with the Algeria of her books and elucidates that which at once inaugurates and closes her quest in *Reveries of the Wild Woman*: "The whole time I was living in Algeria I would dream of one day arriving in Algeria" (Cixous *Reveries* 96, emphasis in text). The rupture is unrealizable, since Cixous does return forty years later, as though it were a question for her of journeying back to the source of her algesia, delivering herself from it through the act of mourning both her father and Algeria. It would have been enough to hear, in the well of her memory, the barking of the dog that, though mistreated by Cixous and her brother, was nevertheless chosen and loved by her father, in order for her father's "phantom" to return. Thanks to this phantom, Cixous is exiled to nowhere, cannot be "patriated" anywhere and brings to completion her deliverance.

#### Notes

1 Cixous was born in Oran in 1937. She is both an Ashkenazi Jew on her mother's side and a Sephardic Jew on her father's. Her ancestors lived in Spain, Morocco, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Germany. Her mother left Germany after Hitler's ascension and moved to Algeria, where she married

Georges Cixous, whose humble Moroccan family had settled in Algeria. Cixous's ancestors settled in Morocco (Tangier and Tetuan) after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. This background constitutes for her what she calls her "double childhood." See Calle-Gruber and Cixous, *Photos*, 183. See also Lydon, "H el ene Cixous" in *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought*, 484-486.

2 *Dedans, Photos de Racines, Les r ev eries de la femme sauvage* and "Mon Alg eriance" have been translated and published in English. I used, therefore, their translations. Other translations are mine.

3 For some comparison between Cixous's autobiographical texts, see Fisher, "Cixous's Auto-Fictional Mother and Father."

4 Algeria, under French occupation since 1830 and at war with France from 1954-1962, was under the yoke of the anti-Semitic laws of Vichy from 1940-1943. Algerian Jews were considered French citizens since the Cremieux decree of October 24, 1870. Algerian anti-Semitism, on the rise in the 1930s due to an increase in European immigration among other factors, was reinforced by the rise of the Vichy regime. Marcel Peyrouton, the ex-governor general of Algeria and Interior Minister of Vichy in 1940 was in charge of the abrogation of the Cremieux decree and refused all new petitions for French citizenship on the part of Jews and Muslims. Algerian Jews had the same status at that time as the German Jews after the Nuremberg laws. See Marrus and Paxton, *Vichy*.

5 "malgeria:" a "mot-valise" used also as an adjective in Cixous, *Reveries*, 6.

6 Several books have been recently published on Algeria, on Algerian Jews and on the relationships between Jews and Arabs in Algeria. See the works of Benbassa, Trigano, Stora and Rousso.

7 A neologism which combines the words "ins eparable," "arable" and "Arabe" in the French language. Like her father she wishes to be inseparable from the Arabs because a same destiny unifies them.

8 Clos-Salembier was located some distance from Algiers, at the mouth of Wild Woman ravine.

9 "Black feet," this term is used to refer to the French people born in Algeria.

10 The *numerus clausus* which goes beyond the stipulations of the anti-Jewish Vichy laws, was applied in Algeria. As Marrus and Paxton observe, "the expulsion of 18,500 Jewish children from public elementary schools (6500 remained) was a far more important step towards segregation than anything that might have been imagined in metropolitan France." (Marrus and Paxton 275).

11 "Even though the anti-Jewish measures in North Africa were at times interpreted as a French concession to Muslim pressures, the Muslim elite, that had

received an Western education, and was disposed towards the resistance, seems to have supported the Jews" (Marrus and Paxton 275).

12 Marshall Pétain was the president of the French fascist state from 1940 to 1944 (Vichy regime).

13 All the anti-Jewish laws were applied in Algeria, especially that of 1940, as well as that of June 2, 1941 affecting the status of Jews (Marrus and Paxton 610-15).

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