Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The Translator

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtrn20

Being outside inside Oran: deconstruction, translation and architecture in Hélène Cixous's 'Promised cities'

Caroline Rabourdin

To cite this article: Caroline Rabourdin (30 Dec 2023): Being outside inside Oran: deconstruction, translation and architecture in Hélène Cixous's 'Promised cities', The Translator, DOI: 10.1080/13556509.2023.2278223

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2023.2278223

Published online: 30 Dec 2023.

THE TRANSLATOR
https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2023.2278223

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Being outside inside Oran: deconstruction, translation and architecture in Hélène Cixous's 'Promised cities'

Caroline Rabourdin

Senior Lecturer in Histories and Theories of Architecture, University of Greenwich,London, UK

ABSTRACT

'I am from Oran. I translate: I am from Hors En [Out In]' (Cixous 2006, 30). Throughout her autobiographical account entitled 'Promised Cities', Hélène Cixous talks about her cities and her many languages. She deconstructs the significant cities of her life, and in particular the city of Oran in Algeria, where she spent her early years at the onset of the Second World War. In this journey across former cities, exodus cities, cities of the past, reconstructed cities, imagined cities, she tells us how personal experience and historical political events have merged at specific locations. Through close reading of 'Promised Cities', this essay shows that Cixous's writing is an embodied practice that extends beyond the French language and embraces cultural multiplicity. Being outside inside Oran, her experience does not follow the delineation of linguistic and national borders, instead Cixous lives in a permanent state of translation, where not only does every language contain the possibility of other languages but every city contains the possibility of other cities. This essay proposes to learn from Cixous's embodied and situated writing, and her sense of 'doubly open belonging', in order to rethink post-colonial identities and architectures in conflicted cities.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 13 September 2022
Accepted 28 October 2023

KEYWORDS
Embodied writing; multilingualism; poststructuralist theory; transnational identities; postcolonial studies

The sound of a writer's voice fills the arts space at the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia: Hélène Cixous reads the English version of her essay 'Promised Cities', translated by Laurent Milesi.[1] In her 2005 address Cixous talks about her cities and their many languages, and as with most of her work, the essay is also autobiographical. She moves between her significant cities of Oran, Osnabrück and Manhattan, all part of her personal and family history. Former cities, exodus cities, cities of the past, reconstructed cities, imagined cities, future cities:

> The word city has always incited me to search for double. I write: I cite. To put it otherwise: I translate. I was born in translation, with translation. (Cixous 2006, 30)

This essay will operate a close reading of Cixous's 'Promised Cities' with a particular focus on the city of Oran in Algeria where Cixous was born. We will analyse Cixous's situated writing, an embodied and spatial form of writing that transcends geographical and

CONTACT Caroline Rabourdin c.rabourdin@greenwich.ac.uk

linguistic boundaries, and show how personal and national events merge at specific locations in Oran. The rich multilingual environment in which she grew up, her capacity to be simultaneously actor and spectator of the city as well as her sense of belonging and non-belonging will allow us to cast new light on the colonial architectural heritage of Oran.

In 'Promised Cities' Cixous situates herself geographically and linguistically, not in a single place or single language but in several at the same time, and is in constant conversation or translation between them. She erases all traditional boundaries: language boundaries disappear, geographical, cultural and national boundaries disappear. The text itself has crossed linguistic and geographical boundaries since it was originally read in French as 'Villes Promises' (Cixous 2005), a keynote for the 21st Assises de la Traduction Littéraire in Arles in 2004, on the theme of 'Les Villes des Écrivains'. The symposium also included interventions and roundtables about the translation of *Ulysses*, a text well known to Cixous since she spent several years researching James Joyce's writing for her doctoral thesis.[2] Both authors share a life in exile and an ability to disrupt and extend the limits of language.

The work of translator Eric Prenowitz will be instrumental in our analysis of Cixous's writing. Prenowitz wrote an introduction to 'Promised Cities' in the form of a 'Biographicosmopolitical' note (2006) that will help us understand the political and geographical aspects of Cixous's writing, while his essay reflecting on the experience of translating her work, with the difficulties and joys it entails (Prenowitz 2004), will help us understand the relation of Cixous's writing with other languages. Prenowitz explains how her language escapes or 'exiles' the French language, within it.

In the first part of this essay we will see how the city of Oran has provided Cixous with a multicultural environment with exposure to many different languages, and show how her writing practice clearly transcends linguistic borders and never really settles into one or the other language. Cixous's writing is a creative translatory practice, which does not conform and is always plural. Her writing is also an embodied practice that calls on the senses and is clearly situated.

In the second part of this essay we will proceed to a spatial analysis of Cixous's text, grounded in the city of Oran, in which she was both actor and spectator, insider and outsider. In a public event with Hélène Cixous and Judith Klein, Mireille Calle-Gruber reflects on Cixous's entire body of work, highlighting the importance of the cities of Oran, Osnabrück and Manhattan in her writing. She talks of Cixous's cities as 'Imaginary Cities', 'places of fascination', 'places of fiction', and explains that they are all contained within one another, or rather overlap with one another:

> Magnetization, polarity, separation, ubiquity: the city for Hélène Cixous is always more than one, and always cardinal, stretched between the four points of the compass, and it is always stratified; there is always one under the other, more ancient, more buried, more ruin. (Calle-Gruber and Crevier Goulet 2006, 135)

Calle-Gruber is interested in the genealogy and the genesis of Cixous's work,[3] and naturally looks towards the archaeology of the cities, searching for past traces. However, the overlap and stratification may suggest regeneration and rebirth as well as ruination, where ruins may serve as foundations, albeit sometimes ill-fitted, for the new city. Calle-Gruber explains that the three cities of Oran, Osnabrück and Manhattan are

'intimate ones, they are the kingdom of the inside' (Calle-Gruber and Crevier Goulet 2006, 136). The cities are all closely linked to Cixous's personal and intimate life: her father was from Oran, her mother from Osnabrück in Germany, and Manhattan is the city of libraries where Cixous finds her 'others in literature' (Calle-Gruber and Crevier Goulet 2006, 142). But although those cities are undoubtedly intimate ones, they are also the cities of major world events. In Oran in particular, we will see how layers of history overlap with Cixous's lived experience. Where the two intersect in specific locations in the city, the personal and intimate become enmeshed in History with a capital H, historical events of global significance, and vice versa. In Cixous's writing, these intersections and overlaps take place on the Place d'Armes. We will see how the city she grew up in during the trauma of the Second World War raised new internal borders, confounding Cixous's sense of national identity, and how ultimately, torn between belonging and not-belonging, she is calling for a 'doubly open' sense of belonging. Finally we will ask whether this idea of 'doubly open belonging' can help us rethink some of Oran's former colonial monuments and architecture, through the example of the statue of Joan of Arc cited in Cixous's 'Promised Cities'.

I

Hélène Cixous was born in Oran, Algeria, when the country was still a French colony. A city on the edge of the African continent, Oran is the second largest city in Algeria. Built along a main ravine leading to the Mediterranean Sea, it bears the cultural and architectural traces of successive occupations by the Spanish, the Ottomans and the French. Given its geographical location and colonial history, the presence of multiple languages in the city should come as no surprise. Cixous was surrounded from an early age by many languages. Not only did she hear French and German at home, but she describes the building she grew up in, 54 rue Philippe, as a house full of languages:

> My languages: I cannot say like J.D. that I only have one language and it isn't mine.
> I lived in a languaged house [*maison à langues*], on the second floor Spanish Mrs Rico, on the third German with French, on the fourth French with Spanish, on the fifth the Hispano-French of Mr Emile and Mrs Carisio [. . .], under the stairs Mohamed's Arabic, on the galleries Spanish. (Cixous 2006, 49–50)

Whilst her friend Jacques Derrida, who also grew up in Algeria, writes about the complexity of his monolingual predicament in the presence of other languages,[4] Hélène Cixous embraces her many languages and celebrates the opportunities offered by her multilingualism. She reveals how word plays were brought to her by her father, master of the French language, playfully attempting to speak German, her mother's mother tongue.[5] Her wordplays as a result are not restricted to the boundaries of any particular language and she enjoys how words are carried across other languages. She learnt French at school and from her father, she learnt German from her mother before learning it at school, she studied English literature and lived in London as a student. Cixous is truly multilingual yet she does not usually translate her own work. In 'Promised Cities' she cites Jacques Derrida's '*Qu'est-ce qu'une traduction "relevante"?*'[6] as a way of explaining what an ideal translation should strive for, but despite having several languages herself and having

been translated into many languages, she tells us that the prospect of translating frightens her:

> This is the theme of translation: one does not arrive. There is the 'arrival' or target language [*langue d'arrivée*], one paces it, one rents it, one is a tenant, one adopts and is adopted, one tastes in it the delights of new surroundings one is not of one's blood. At least this is my case. The idea of 'doing' a translation frightens me. (Cixous 2006, 40–41)

Upon hearing the French version, '*On n'arrive pas*', this listener can't help but hear '*On n'y arrive pas*' (we do not succeed). Not only do we not succeed, but we cannot arrive in the *langue d'arrivée*, the host language. The missing letter, the absence of *adverbe de lieu*, actually points to the fact that we can never reach the place intended, for it is simply missing. We do not arrive: '*On n'arrive pas*', grammatically one needs to arrive somewhere, unless used as an interjection ('*j'arrive*'), and here the place of arrival is missing. Perhaps there is no such thing as a *langue d'arrivée* as it implies a sense of stable entity, a language that is delineated and definitive, which of course no language ever is. Arriving and returning are recurrent themes in Cixous's work,[7] and are applied here to language as a place. Languages become places in their own right, somewhere to get to. Cixous sets foot in other languages, and when she reads or performs her text in English, she delights in the language and enjoys the visits, but she always steps back into the French language she so enjoys playing with. When reading aloud from the English translation of 'Promised Cities' for instance, she inevitably returns to the French language, having to use '*Or*' for 'gold': she needs to call on the original text, step back and bring the French language into the English language, to prevent the meaning being lost on the listener.

In *The Last Painting or the Portrait of God*,[8] Hélène Cixous reveals her aspiration to 'write like painting', so as to capture a moment, like Paul Cézanne. Here I contend that her approach to writing is perhaps closer to collage-making than painting. Collage-making is understood as a truly physical and embodied art practice where the hand is also at work, and which the architect Ben Nicholson describes as 'unintentionally both haunting and surprising' (Nicholson 1990, 19). Nicholson explains that while 'Painting and drawing require every mark on the canvas to pass through the fingers of the artist', collage-making, 'on the other hand, cannot fully control what occurs in the juxtapositions because it uses readymade components' (Nicholson 1990, 19). Words, in Cixous's work, are collected like images and cut-outs, sometimes sliced into yet smaller pieces, shuffled, and re-assembled to create new meanings. She works with the materiality of language, reappropriating and playing with pre-existing French idioms. As Prenowitz explains, she manipulates idioms:

> folding them on themselves or unpacking them, deconstructing them and over-overdetermining them, exiling them from the French language, but within it, in relation to it. Such that the said language finds itself speaking in tongues: foreign tongues of its own. (Prenowitz 2006, 18)

Cixous collects the sounds that she so cherishes, capturing her mother's every word (in a mixture of French and German) on a notepad before they disappear.[9] She plays games with words, makes unexpected or 'unheard-of' associations and juxtapositions, testing their signification, twisting their meaning – this practice also comes from Montaigne's essay writing, where *essayer* means to test or try out. In 'La langue des alliances. Mon

Algériance', Mireille Calle-Gruber (2002) goes further and notes that Cixous plays languages [jouer aux langues], rather than plays with language. Her word games do not appear to follow any rules and it is in fact by breaking the rules that she finds new meanings. Her work intentionally disrupts the expected order of grammar, always in search of new 'flavours':

> I never did anything but translate that is to say want to taste the taste of *all* the tastes, try all the words, invent new mixtures, bring extremes closer, go to the roots, return to the sources of sources. (Cixous 2006, 50)

Cixous's constant travail on language, with the material of language: cutting, placing, splicing, rotating, duplicating, rearranging, creates new meanings *in excess of* the French language. Translators of Cixous's texts, in the volume edited by Myriam Diocaretz and Marta Segarra (2004) titled *Joyful Babel: Translating Hélène Cixous*, have all expressed the difficulties in translating her work, because the way she plays with the French language cannot be rendered in another language and is perceived as 'untranslatable'.[10] We have seen for instance how her translations necessarily involve bringing the French language into the other language. In his contribution to the volume, Eric Prenowitz painstakingly highlights some key equivocal terms used by the author and explains that her writing is far from being self-referential and circumscribed to the French language:

> So the unflinching resistance to translation that takes hold at the heart of Hélène Cixous's texts does not represent a linguistic solipsism, a cause for the reinforcement of impermeable borders (national, cultural, intellectual . . .). On the contrary. It is the only movement possible. It is precisely what, in the language, cannot be appropriated by the language. Cixous's untranslatable idioms inhabit the French language, and yet it defies and overwhelms the French language, outpacing it, escaping from its grasp, within the French language. (Prenowitz 2004, 52)

Her writing sits both within and without the French language, but also as we will see later, both within and without any cultural and national borders. Having recently undertaken the translation of one of Mireille Calle-Gruber's essays about Hélène Cixous's work, in which she quotes extensively from the author, extending the idioms even further, I have experienced the difficulty and joys of translating her writing, and want to thank Sophie Lewis for her guidance. The process of translating Cixous's work also revealed the multiplicity at work in her writing. When faced with polysemy and multiple choices, I was presented with a dilemma and soon realised that it wasn't just difficult to choose one word over the other, but that I did not *want* to choose. I felt obliged to choose a word for the purposes of the translation, and while all of them were valid choices, none of them could truly render the multiplicity of the original French word on their own. If Cixous does not contemplate the idea of 'doing' a translation herself, it might be partly because she already knows that this layer of resistance is inherent in her own writing, or more likely, as she explains in 'Promised Cities', because she acknowledges and owns the fact that translation *already* runs through her entire body of work.[11] Her writing operates a constant work of translation and displacement within and without the French language, creating a language of her own, a language that is both French and foreign.

In addition to moving through language(s), Cixous also moves across various forms of writing: from theoretical essays widely read in anglophone academic circles, to works drawing from real life experiences, and the immersive and embodied form of playwriting

for the Théâtre du Soleil, Cixous's work is multifarious and experimental, constantly shifting between registers. Her writing practice is highly creative and engages with the visual arts. Indeed, 'Promised Cities' was read on the occasion of the opening of Maria Chevska's installation at the Slought Foundation, and published alongside the artist's work in *Ex-Cities* (Cixous 2006). As an architect, I am interested in what architecture can learn from her writing practice. Her essay 'Attacks of the Castle' was published in the seminal handbook *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Architectural Theory* edited by Neil Leach in 1997 in the 'Poststructuralism' section, alongside Andrew Benjamin, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Paul Virilio and of course Jacques Derrida. However, her influence in architectural theory and practice did not gain the same momentum as that of her friend Jacques Derrida in the 80s. It is also worth noting that she is the only female philosopher to figure in this anthology. Two architects have since addressed this shortcoming, shedding light on Cixous's work and its relevance to architecture. In a recent online symposium organised by Neil Leach, Doina Petrescu (2021), a Paris-based architect and former student of Hélène Cixous, talked about Cixous's social engagement in support of the *sans-papiers*,[12] citing more specifically the political plays she wrote for the Théâtre du Soleil. Petrescu explains that the notion of *hospitality* developed by Cixous had informed her own community-based architectural projects in Paris. Looking at Cixous's work from a different perspective, architectural theorist Hélène Frichot is interested in Cixous's form(s) of writing, and learns some key 'lessons' from Cixous's (1991) *Coming to Writing*. In 'Following Hélène Cixous's Steps Towards a Writing Architecture', Frichot explains that Cixous's work enabled her to bridge the gap between architecture and philosophy, and afforded her the right to write, as a woman, as an architect, as a woman architect: 'Cixous provided me with what seemed to be my first entry visa, a (w)rite of passage' (Frichot 2010, 313). But the most relevant lesson that Frichot draws from Cixous's writing is that:

> Writing comes from the corporeal expressivity of the body in which it is co-productive, and the idea of what constitutes this body can be extended to refer to any kind of body, a body of text, of water, of biological or mineral stuff, a building-body, and we do not yet know what a body can do. (Frichot 2010, 315)

Cixous's writing is corporeal, an embodied and situated form of writing, and 'Promised Cities' is a form of architecture-writing[13] that not only explores and blurs the boundaries of languages, but also challenges spatial and political boundaries. The very presence of the author in the text is essential to her spatial descriptions and recollections. The author's body is clearly and very precisely situated in the city of Oran. Through this *mise-en-situation*, Cixous highlights some of the complexities of national identity and belonging in a colonial city, and helps us understand the complexities of post-colonial space and architecture.

II

In this second part I want to focus on Hélène Cixous's spatial understanding, her *standing* in the city of Oran. After a brief detour via Dublin with James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* at the opening of her talk, Cixous introduces herself:

> I am from Oran. I translate: I am from *Hors En* [Out In]. I go from *Or* [gold] in *Hors*. I translate: I go from *Hors* in *Hors*. To start with I am from without [*du hors*] (Cixous 2006, 30)

If throughout this paper I have quoted from the English version of 'Promised Cities', as the text was *performed* by Cixous in English, on this occasion I feel the need, like the author in her verbal address, to refer to the original French version:

> Je suis d'Oran. Je traduis: je suis d'Hors En. Je vais d'Or en Hors. Je traduis: je vais d'Hors en Hors. Pour commencer je suis du hors. (Cixous 2006, 92)

The author slices Oran into monosyllabic words, and with the economy of a few juxtaposed words, Cixous paints her entire relationship with her city. A self-portrait. She is both outside, *Hors*, Oran, and inside, *en*, Oran. Ambivalence and multiplicity are well known characteristics of poststructural and postmodern thought, and Cixous's deconstruction of Oran refers also to Jacques Derrida's *différance*. Here we are presented with an apparent contradiction: the impossibility, or rather the very possibility, of being both inside and outside at the same time. '*Or*' in French is a conjunction which adds a new element, sometimes in opposition to the first: 'and yet'. So as well as giving us the *Hors* (outside) in Oran, Cixous highlights the simultaneous experience of two situations which would typically be understood as exclusive, and introduces the reader to the complexity and contradiction[14] of her relationship with the city. Cixous is from Oran, 'inseparable' from the city (Cixous 2006, 30), and yet she is outside it.

In 'Promised Cities', Cixous describes herself as both spectator and actor of the city. We know of course that she collaborated with and wrote many plays for the Théâtre du Soleil in Vincennes, but the theatre was already present in her early life in Oran. Cixous lived 'at no.54 rue Philippe, second gallery on the right facing the stage of the Place d'Armes' (Cixous 2006, 38). She depicts the view from the family apartment as a view from a theatre gallery. The apartment balcony becomes a viewing gallery, a place for the whole family to watch the city below, and the Place d'Armes becomes the stage:

> The backdrop: a town hall flanked by two lions. On the right, the theatre, on the left in the background, Plato's Pharmacy, run by my pharmagicians, stage left the Military Academy [Cercle Militaire] where all that makes me enraged, ethically astounded politically foreseeing etc. happened to me. (Cixous 2006, 40)

The buildings on the stage represent the political (the town hall), the military (the cercle militaire, symbol of French colonialism), and the cultural (the theatre) dimensions of the city. Plato's pharmacy and her pharmagicians is most likely a reference to her grandfather's shop 'Les Deux Mondes',[15] a hat and tobacco shop located on the Place d'Armes, as well as a reference to Jacques Derrida's (1981) essay 'Plato's Pharmacy', in which he introduces the concept of Pharmakon, both remedy and poison. The Place d'Armes is a condensed city, and a theatre stage on which historical events unfold. The description also contains a *mise-en-abîme* where the spectator looks at a stage which itself contains a theatre. Later, Cixous tells us of her memory of dancing on the stage of the said theatre as a child, so the *mise-en-abîme* becomes a sort of mirror in which Hélène Cixous appears twice: once on the gallery looking down at the theatre, and once on the real theatre stage being looked at. The reader looks at the theatre from the balcony, then follows Hélène Cixous to the theatre stage almost seamlessly. Moving from the privacy of her apartment to the public space gives

a sense of porosity reminiscent of the descriptions by Walter Benjamin and theatre director Asja Lacis after their visit to the city of Naples. In *Naples*, Benjamin and Lacis (1986) describe how the boundaries between private and public space evaporate and private life extends onto the streets. Yet at the same time, the city remains somehow inaccessible to the visitor, who can only observe as a foreigner, being inside the city, yet not fully belonging and finding themselves still outside. The ambivalence for Cixous lies in the fact that she was both very much part of the city, as a child on centre stage, as well as detached from the historical events that she witnessed from her balcony.[16] She was both watching and being watched.

Her early years in Oran are marked by major events taking place in this city-theatre. When Cixous is 3, the Military Academy becomes a place of political indoctrination, when she is 5, in 1942, the Place d'Armes becomes the backdrop for the theatrical entry of the allied troops. She recalls:

> How aged three I was initiated within the Military Academy in Oran into as much negative philosophy as there is in Dostoyevsky, I killed and was killed, I was inside and I wasn't. How aged four I had the honour of singing 'Maréchal here we come' out of a pleasure of doing like all the other children and how my father exorcized me, how aged five I saw marching in with great pomp those that enter by right and might as in Shakespeare, the Americans De Gaulle Fortinbras Henri Vth Giraud all parading in tanks and on horses right in front of my sandals. How I was on the balcony, a hen by my side, *the* hen and its egg, like a Scandinavian divinity which follows the human world events while crying powerlessly. (Cixous 2006, 43)

These events, witnessed from a distance, are immediately followed by her experience of dancing on the stage of the Oran theatre:

> How I danced on the stage of the Oran theatre, almost blind following the thick chalk strokes drawn for me on the floor so I would not hurl myself into the pit [. . .] (Cixous 2006, 44)

From the height of the building's second floor and the global scale of world events, the reader drops to the height of a 5-year-old child, looking through her eyes down to chalk lines on the floor. This shift of scale is brutal, a sudden drop to the floor, reinforcing the writer's sense of powerlessness in the face of the political events of the time. Hélène Cixous was born in 1937 on the eve of the Second World War, and on 7 October 1940, the French Vichy government revoked the French nationality of all Jews living in Algeria. In the opening prologue of the book *Osnabrück*, she describes her first day at school in Oran, giving a vivid and emotional account of this particular moment:

> Dehors, j'étais seule dans Oran vidée sur la scène carrelée de la terrasse, sans témoin sans juge, seule avec un vide qui s'étendait de toutes parts [. . .] (Cixous 1999, 10)

Aged 3, sobbing outside the front door of the school, separated from her mother, she felt isolation and exclusion. She was outside inside Oran. The makeshift school was in fact a dining room quickly set up to receive Jewish children who had been excluded from the 'true school'. Her feeling of isolation and the separation from her mother is accompanied here by a feeling of exclusion: *dehors*. As a result of world events and the decree of the French Vichy government, she could no longer enter her own city. She was in Oran, excluded from Oran, and stripped of her nationality. Later she talks about her shared sentiment with Jacques Derrida, who experienced a similar situation, and she adds:

> What we feared above all else was the word France, we wanted French, the French language and its abundant brilliance but not France. (Cixous 2006, 49)

Derrida and Cixous's attachment to the French language was so strong that they were willing to overlook its links with the French nation. They managed to dissociate the language from the colonising power. Cixous left Algeria for France on board the ship *City of Algiers* in 1955, and almost 50 years later, during a lecture at SOAS university, she explained that, although the city of Oran had appeared in her writing, she had 'voluntarily abstained from writing about Algeria for ethical and political reasons' (Cixous 2011, 165).[17] She says that she is still ill at ease with the word 'nation', 'caught in the tension of two opposites: non-belonging and belonging' (Cixous 2011, 160). In her address she also talks about the dangers and pitfalls of some post-colonial discourses promoting 'nationalist Nation-State' attitudes which seek to simplify, integrate or homogenise, leading to the 'fatal denial of cultural multiplicity' (Cixous 2011, 161–164). Instead, she wishes for:

> the freedom to not love at times the nation one is indebted to and at times to love it [. . .] to cultivate doubly open belonging, belonging-at-the-window, to the sea and to the earth, I would like to be hétéronational without being commanded to choose and to obey. (Cixous 2011, 174)

Cixous acknowledges the contradictions inherent to cultural identities, and chooses to embrace multiplicity and complexity. This complexity is also found in Oran's colonial architecture. The Hôtel de Ville and the all-important Theatre she describes on the Place d'Armes were designed by French architects. The Hôtel de Ville was completed in 1886 by Francisque Estibot, appointed architect of the city of Oran, and the Theatre was completed in 1908 by Léonce Hainez, who had recently completed the Théâtre Sebastopol in Lille in the north of France. Both buildings use elements of classical architecture arranged in compositions reminiscent of Renaissance architecture, meant to connote ideals of grandeur and order, yet the strict classical rules appear to be disrupted by unusual elements, such as the two small domes propped by columns atop the Theatre. Architectural historians Claudine Piaton, Juliette Hueber and Thierry Lochard classify the style of both buildings as eclectic, drawing elements from different time periods and cultures (2021, 136, 157). Cixous does not describe any particular architectural element of the buildings' elevations in Promised Cities, yet, as we have already seen, she insists on the theatrical aspect of the Place d'Armes:

> All the Algerians know the Place d'Armes. One cannot imagine anything more theatre-like, more Arabo-Greek, more Shakespearian. (Cixous 2006, 38)

For Cixous the Place d'Armes becomes the theatre stage where human tragedies unfold and the reference to Greece can also be found on the theatre itself, in the form of a monumental sculpture of Apollo, Greek god of the Arts, surrounded by his music and comedy muses, at the very top of the building.

Statues and monuments play an important part in Cixous's text. She talks about the role that the statue of Joan of Arc played for her as a child, and cites her essay 'Savoir' (Cixous, 1998):

> Elle devait passer tous les jours au large du château. L'aide venait de la statue de Jeanne d'Arc. La grande femme en or brandissait sa lance flamboyante et lui montrait la direction du

> château. En suivant l'indication d'or elle finissait par y arriver. Jusqu'au jour où. Un matin sur la place il n'y avait plus rien. La statue n'était pas là. (Cixous 2006, 93)

> Every day she had to pass by the castle. Help came from the statue of Joan of Arc. The great golden woman brandished her flaming lance and showed her the way to the castle. By following the golden sign she would finally get there. Until the day when. One morning in the square there was nothing. The statue was not there. (Cixous 2006, 31)

The golden statue of Joan of Arc from Orléans stood proudly in front of the Cathédrale du Sacré Cœur in Oran. The leading figure was a guide for Hélène Cixous, helping her to navigate the city. But one day Cixous's myopia meant that she could no longer see the brightest of signs and felt totally disorientated. Without her guide, without the gold, without *Or* [gold] in Oran, Cixous loses her bearings and starts referring to herself in the third person:

> As one can see, she cannot see where she is. She is so lost that she is in the third person of herself, far from me and I. (Cixous 2006, 32)

The statue had not gone, however: the French woman made of gold, *en or*, was still there. She had been inaugurated in 1931 to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of French occupation, as a symbol of colonial power and victory, and remained in place until Algerian independence in 1962. In 1964, Joan of Arc was relocated to the Place de la Résistance in the city of Caen, France, and on her new pedestal one can read:

> A Jeanne d'Arc – Oran 1931 – Caen 1964
> Cette statue a été érigée à Oran en l'honneur de Jeanne d'Arc le 10 mai 1931
> Cette statue donnée à la ville de Caen a été solennellement inaugurée le 10 mai 1964

While the inscription bears the trace of the displacement of the statue, there is no mention of the fact that it had been erected for the hundredth anniversary of Algerian occupation, only that it had been erected in memory of Joan of Arc herself. Hélène Cixous's guide in Oran, the statue of Joan of Arc from Orléans, now sits in Caen and through this displacement, part of the colonial history of Algeria has been removed from the city of Oran.[18]

The statue of Joan of Arc is unequivocally a symbol of the French nation, a representation of France itself, yet interestingly Cixous makes little mention of this symbolic power, viewing the statue mainly as a wayfinding device, and a symbol of her deteriorating eyesight. As shown in the comparison between the original French version and its English translation above, Laurent Milesi chose the word 'sign' to translate Cixous's *indication*, and the 'indication d'or' for a direction in *Or*-an, became *the golden sign* in the English version. This choice is quite significant: 'The golden sign' is one of the great *trouvailles* of Milesi's translation, enabling the reader to bridge the gap between linguistics and architecture. Architecture learns from a range of disciplines: the linguistic sign, developed by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce at the turn of the twentieth century, made its way into architectural theory in the 1960s. The question of meaning in architecture was addressed by practitioners and theorists, who envisaged buildings as signifiers that convey meaning.[19] In his essay 'Semiology and the Urban', Roland Barthes proposes a semantics of the urban environment where buildings, like monuments, are seen as inscriptions of humankind in space, imbued with signification (Barthes 1997). Taking the city of Rome as an example, Barthes talks about the 'conflict

between the functional necessities of modern life, and the semantic charge given to the city by its history'. A similar argument could be made about Oran and its colonial architecture: the Cathédrale du Sacré Cœur, in front of which stood the statue of Joan of Arc, perfectly illustrates this conflicted and complex situation. The building was designed in 1900 by architect Albert Ballu but the plans had to be modified in 1908 by the famous French architects Auguste and Gustave Perret for structural reasons. Originally selected for its simplicity and economy, the design was further simplified by the Perret brothers and the result is a singular building of brick and concrete, fronted by a large entrance arch ornate with a mosaic fresco, and square towers either side. This building is a long-lasting reminder, or signifier, of the colonising power and its religion. The building is now a public library, the *Bibliothèque régionale d'Oran*, yet despite its new function, it still seems difficult to prise apart the signifier and signified and dissociate the building from its colonial past. Poststructuralist thinking, with its complexity and contradictions, might help us rethink postcolonial architecture. Indeed, Barthes's position in 'Semiology and the Urban' starts to shift from structuralist to post-structuralist theory as he writes about the transience of the signifieds:

> The signifieds are like mythical creatures, extremely imprecise, and at a certain point they always become the signifiers of something else; the signifieds are transient, the signifiers remain. (Barthes [1967] 1997, 169)

There is no denying that the building, bearing a mosaic of the Christ on the main elevation with reference to Byzantine architecture remains a signifier of Catholicism. However, following in Hélène Cixous's footsteps, we might ask whether the signifier can point to multiple signifieds. Can the building be both a signifier of French colonialism *and yet* a signifier of the new independent Nation of Algeria? The cathedral, symbol of the religion of the coloniser, and the library, symbol of the knowledge of an independent Nation? Earlier we have seen how Cixous talks of her 'love of the French language and its abundant brilliance, but not France'. She plays with signifiers, breaks conventional grammatical rules in order to create new flavours and meanings. Can we learn from Cixous and see French architecture and its abundant brilliance, but not France? Can these buildings be regarded simply as French architecture and not as signifiers of colonial France? Hélène Cixous tells us that she is outside inside Oran, redefining notions of belonging and non-belonging, choosing to 'cultivate doubly open belonging' and 'the freedom to not love at times the nation one is indebted to and at times to love it'. Can we therefore *choose* to be in a library in a cathedral, or choose to be in a cathedral in a library? Can the city's inhabitants cultivate this doubly open belonging? One might choose to be in either the cathedral *or* the library, yet ultimately one is unavoidably contained in the other and so the situation is no longer one of exclusion but of double inclusion.

Notes

1. The seminar was part of a series organised by the Slought Foundation on the theme of exile and displacement, to coincide with the opening of *Vera's Room*, an installation by artist Maria Chevska, and the release of her book in collaboration with Hélène Cixous. As well as the French and English versions of Cixous's 'Promised Cities', the publication includes an introduction from the editor Aaron Levy, a 'Biographicosmopolitical note' by Eric Prenowitz, pictures of *Vera's Room*, a reflection on Cixous' work by Jean-Michel Rabaté, and the

companion audio CD of Cixous' reading. As Aaron Levy explains, the aim of the publication was not only to document the event, but to 'reproduce [the author's] singular presence in book form' (Cixous 2006, 9).

2. Cixous's research was subsequently published as *L'exil de James Joyce, ou l'art du remplacement* (Cixous 1968).
3. See Mireille Calle-Gruber 'Cixous à Montaigne, L'essai comme forme de réécriture' (2004).
4. See Jacques Derrida's *Monolingualism of the Other, Or, the Prosthesis of Origin* (Derrida 1998a)
5. 'My father, a marvellous speaker of French, set about learning an invented German language, a kind of hilarious, pantomimed Aliengerman [autreallemand]' (Cixous 2006, 61).
6. Jacques Derrida's '*Qu'est-ce qu'une traduction "relevante"?*' was presented at the Assises de la Traduction littéraire in Arles in 1998. Jacques Derrida appears several times in Cixous's 'Villes Promises' and it is worth noting that she delivered her talk in the month following the passing of her long-time friend.
7. See for instance the impossible return from Osnabrück in Cixous (2001)*Benjamin à Montaigne, il ne faut pas le dire*.
8. In Cixous (1991)*'Coming to Writing' and Other Essays* ed. by Deborah Jenson. Harvard University Press.
9. In Cixous (2001) *Benjamin à Montaigne, il ne faut pas le dire*, Paris: Galilèe.
10. See Derrida, J. (2002) *H.C pour la vie, c'est-à-dire . . .* in which Jacques Derrida talks of Hélène Cixous's writing practice.
11. See also 'Cixous and Language: Upkeep and Loss' in *Algerian Imprints: Ethical Space in the work of Assia Djebar and Hélène Cixous* where Brigitte Weltman-Aron writes that 'the revered injunction', or in other words her father's legacy, 'is not the ability to speak several languages, but to inhabit languages as already in translation. Consequently, Cixous's inventive writing should not be interpreted as wordplay for the sake of playfulness. Grammar is both an impassable law and one that induces resistance in the writer, if only because language itself resists' (Weltman-Aron 2015, 75).
12. The term *sans-papiers* is used to refer to undocumented migrants who are claiming asylum in France.
13. See Jane Rendell's definition of 'Architecture Writing' in Critical Architecture (2007, p. 88). Jane Rendell also wrote about feminist writing as a form of architectural research and developed the notion of site-writing.
14. Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture is the subject of a very well-known eponymous book by architect Robert Venturi, published in 1966, now a key reading of postmodern architectural thinking, in which contradictions and ambiguities are highlighted in buildings of different eras and geographical locations.
15. For information about her grandfather's shop, see 'Albums et Légendes' in Calle-Gruber, M. and Cixous (1994) *Hélène Cixous, photos de racines*, Paris: des Femmes, pp.183–184.
16. The notion of the gaze, especially in private spheres, has been developed by feminist architectural theorists, but usually the female is being watched and objectified (see for instance Beatriz Colomina's essay on Adolf Loos' houses in Colomina (1992)), whereas here the gaze is more complex, with Cixous looking at her younger self.
17. It is worth noting here that Cixous had published 'Mon Algeriance' in the culture magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* (1997), in which she writes that her passport is a 'fake', and starts to explore her relationship to Algeria and Algerian women.
18. In her study for the research project 'Narratives and Representations of the French Settlers of Algeria', Beatrice Ivey (2018) explains how another monument, the Sidi-Brahim monument originally erected on the Place d'Armes in memory of French soldiers, had become the Abd El-Kader monument, a celebration of Algerian victory after the independence of Algeria in 1962. For details see https://www.pieds-noirs.stir.ac.uk/the-sidi-brahim-monument/
19. See 'The Crisis of Meaning' in *An Introduction to Architectural Theory 1968 to the Present* by Harry Francis Mallgrave and David Goodman (2011) pp.37–52.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Dr. Caroline Rabourdin is Senior Lecturer in Architecture, Histories and Theories at the University of Greenwich and the author of *Sense in Translation: Essays on the Bilingual Body* (Rabourdin, 2020). Trained as an architect, she practised for a number of years in Paris and London before undertaking her PhD at the University of the Arts London. She has taught architectural theory and design at Ecole Spéciale d'Architecture in Paris, Chelsea College of Arts, the AA School of Architecture and the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. Her research interests include spatial theory, phenomenology, poststructuralist theory, translation studies and comparative literature. She considers essay writing as a critical and creative practice, and the space between languages as a productive space for new architectural ideas. She is currently working on a translation project funded by the Arts Council England, with Sophie Lewis and Matthew Chrislip.

ORCID

Caroline Rabourdin http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9694-0384

References

Barthes, R. [1967] 1997. "Semiology and the Urban." In *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, edited by Leach, N. London: Routledge 158–164.

Benjamin, W., and A. Lacis. 1986. "Naples." In *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, translated by Edmund Jephcott. New York: Schocken Books 163–173.

Calle-Gruber, M. 2002. "La langue des alliances. Mon Algériance." *Études littéraires* 33 (3): 83–94. https://doi.org/10.7202/501309ar.

Calle-Gruber, M. 2004. "L'essai comme forme de réécriture: Cixous à Montaigne." *Études françaises* 40 (n° 1): 29–42. https://doi.org/10.7202/008474ar.

Calle-Gruber, M., and H. Cixous. 1994. *Hélène Cixous, photos de racines*. Paris: des Femmes.

Calle-Gruber, M., and S.-A. Crevier Goulet. 2006. "Helene Cixous's Imaginary Cities: Oran-Osnabruck-Manhattan-Places of Fascination, Places of Fiction." *New Literary History a Journal of Theory and Interpretation* 37 (1): 135–146. https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2006.0013.

Cixous, H. 1968. *L'exil de James Joyce, ou L'art du remplacement*. Paris: Éditions Bernard Grasset.

Cixous, H. 1991. *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, translated by Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson, Ann Liddle, Susan Sellers. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Cixous, H. 1997. "Mon Algériance." *Les Inrockuptibles* 115: 70–74.

Cixous, H. 1998. "Savoir." In *Voiles*. Paris: Editions Galilée.

Cixous, H. 1999. *Osnabrück*. Paris: Des Femmes.

Cixous, H. 2001. *Benjamin à Montaigne, il ne faut pas le dire*. Paris: Galilée.

Cixous, H. 2005. "Villes promises." In *Vingt et unièmes assises de la traduction littéraire (Arles 2004): les villes des écrivains/avec la participation de Jacques Aubert*. Paris: ATLAS 187–204.

Cixous, H. 2006. "Promised Cities," translated by Laurent Milesi. In *Ex-Cities*, edited by Aaron Levy. Philadelphia: Slought Books 27–71.

Cixous, H. "How Not to Speak of Algeria." In *Volleys of Humanity*, translated by Eric Prenowitz. Edinburgh University Press. 2011, 160–176.

Colomina, B. 1992. "The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism." In *Sexuality and Space*, edited by B. Colomina. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press 73–128.

Derrida, J., [1972]. "Plato's Pharmacy." In *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, 63–171.

Derrida, J. 1998a. *Monolingualism of the Other, Or, the Prosthesis of Origin*, translated by Patrick Mensah. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press.
Derrida, J. 1998b. "Qu'est-ce qu'une traduction 'relevante'?" In *Quinzièmes Assises de la traduction littéraire*, Arles: Actes Sud, 21–48.
Derrida, J. 2002. *H.C. pour la vie, c'est-à-dire. . ..* Paris: Editions Galilée.
Diocaretz, M., and M. Segarra (eds). 2004. *Joyful Babel: translating Héléne Cixous*. Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi.
Frichot, H. 2010. "Following Hélène Cixous' Steps Towards a Writing Architecture." *Architectural Theory Review* 312–323. https://doi.org/10.1080/13264826.2010.524310.
Ivey, B. 2018 'The Sidi-Brahim Monument – Pieds-Noirs'. Available at: https://www.pieds-noirs.stir.ac.uk/the-sidi-brahim-monument/ .
Mallgrave, H. F., and D. Goodman. 2011. "The Crisis of Meaning." In *An Introduction to Architectural Theory 1968 to the Present* edited by Harry Francis Mallgrave and David Goodman, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell 37–52.
Nicholson, B. 1990. "Collage Making." In *Appliance House*. Cambridge, Mass: Chicago Institute for Architecture and Urbanism ; MIT Press 16–19.
Petrescu, D. 2021 "Architecture + Philosophy: What can Architects Learn from Philosophy?" Digital Futures World. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81eN5B-aj60.
Piaton, C., J. Hueber, and T. Lochard 2021. *Oran: Ville et architecture 1790-1960*. Arles, Algers, Paris: Editions Honoré Clair / Editions Barzakh / CNTS-INHA InVisu.
Prenowitz, E. 2004. "Nearly Reading Hélène Cixous: The 'Equivocal Vocation' of Translation." In *Joyful Babel: Translating Héléne Cixous*, edited by M. Diocaretz and M. Segarra. Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 47–60.
Prenowitz, E. 2006. "A Biographicosmopolitical Note." In *Ex-Cities*, edited by Aaron Levy. Philadelphia: Slought Books, 17–25.
Rendell, J. 2007. "Architecture Writing." In *Critical Architecture*, edited by Jane Rendell, Jonathan Hill, Mark Dorrian and Murray Fraser Oxon. New York: Routledge, 87–91.
Weltman-Aron, B. 2015. *Algerian Imprints: Ethical Space in the Work of Assia Djebar and Hélène Cixous*. New York: Columbia University Press.