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Crossing Frames of Art and Identity: Baya, Cixous, and Béji

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ABSTRACT

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Born in North African countries and brought up in transcultural environments, Algerian painter Baya Mahiddine, Francophone author Hélène Cixous, and Tunisian writer Hélé Béji produce works that challenge national, cultural, and social frames of category. This study demonstrates how the three women explore their complex sociocultural backgrounds and produce original works and ideas that undermine preset conventions.

The paper examines Baya, Cixous, and Béji in separate chapters in order to identify the commonalities and distinctions of their personal histories and works. They develop innovative techniques or ideas from a transcultural perspective that illustrates, addresses, and transcends issues concerning a complicated past: a disconnected heritage, an inaccessible homeland, and fading cultural traditions. Despite their divergent origins and motivations, they converge in the project of recreating identity through the creative activities of painting and writing. From a unique “transceptive” viewpoint that crosses the boundaries of time, gender, and culture, they re-present and rewrite femininity, memory, and sociocultural realities in a way that surpasses classifications and expectations. Whether due to their sociocultural circumstance or personal conviction,
they exercise a liberated creativity in order to contribute important works to the fields of visual arts and Francophone literature.

In the process of investigating the significant and original accomplishments of Baya, Cixous, and Béji, this study reveals the location of “truth” of each woman’s transcultural identity. Their plural subjectivity lies beyond the confines of a frame and resides in an undesignated “passe-partout,” or interstitial, region. Within the spaces of art and literature, the three women discover a place of illusion, a “Ka’aba,” where they can enjoy a liberated creativity and express their singularity. As the twenty-first century heads towards an increasingly transnational future, individuals globally must similarly embrace a transjective vision in order to maintain cross-cultural understanding and solidarity.
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Geographical borders, cultural and ethnic designations, social groups, and gender represent examples of categorizations used for determining identity. Yet even by “fitting” into a set system of definition, do individuals have a clearer sense of self? Moreover for others whose origins reveal a complicated history consisting of overlapping nationalities and a mixed ethnocultural heritage, how do classifications define the plurality of their circumstance? Conventional perspectives thus disintegrate due to the shifting diversity of preconceived social or gendered boundaries. While Baya Mahieddine, Hélène Cixous, and Hélé Béji are born in North African countries, they also share the commonality of producing works that challenge national, cultural, and social frames of category. Critics consider Baya’s paintings and Cixous’s texts unclassifiable. Likewise, Béji’s writings display a unique viewpoint that combines multiple cultural and generational perspectives. The complex backgrounds of these women not only undermine predetermined boundaries and dichotomies, but also influence the production of their original works and ideas.

This study focuses on Baya, Cixous, and Béji in order to recognize the remarkable contributions that they make to the fields of art and literature. It also compares the different stories linked to the women’s divergent sociocultural backgrounds in order to illustrate the diverse circumstances that exist among North African individuals: Baya comes from an Arab-Kabyle-Berber heritage, Cixous grows up in a Jewish-French family, and Béji is raised in a liberal Muslim Tunisian home. By choosing an artist and two writers, the paper tries to identify thematic parallels that exist across the media of painting and writing. In particular, the analyses consider how the works display the
notions of transculturality, femininity, the reinvention of identity, and "transpectivity." The selection of this study's principal works of interest in turn is based on the availability of materials (given the limited published prints of Baya's gouaches) and on the autobiographical quality of the compositions. Through a close reading of the paintings and texts, this paper aims to explore the personal stories of the three women within their respective transcultural contexts and demonstrate how the individuals transcend preconceived labels that tend to misrepresent their accomplishments.

Each chapter examines Baya, Cixous, and Béji's works using a theoretical framework that seeks to contend with problematic systems of categorization. The analyses draw on concepts that Linda Alcoff, Vera Lucia Soares, Walter Mignolo and Freya Schiwy, Jean Burgos, Homi Bhabha, and Edouard Glissant propose. For example, subjectivity emerges through a "process of consciousness" and possesses an "emergent property," as Alcoff argues in her article "Cultural Feminism vs. Poststructuralism."¹ Identity formation therefore results from the influence of "experience" on the subject.² Likewise, identity becomes "at once a state as well as a movement" as Mignolo and Schiwy explain in "Beyond Dichotomies."³ Glissant similarly proposes that the concept of identity is as a "system of relation" in which self-definition represents a shifting and interactive reality.⁴ The "movement" that exists at the point of convergence, or relation,


² Alcoff 320.


gives the individual’s subjectivity the freedom to evolve as the relationships between the elements of her identity change. Soares’s observations of memory in her essay “Entre mémoire et oubli” also help explain how Baya, Cixous, and Béji recreate their subjectivity over the course of re-membering their past. Closely linked to the continuous evolution of an individual’s subjectivity, the act of remembering resembles an open-ended activity of errant wandering between “memory” and “oblivion.” As a result of these efforts, a “(re)invention of identities” takes place. Thus remembering and reinventing identity prove to be congruent processes.

Moving from the psychoanalytical realm to literature, Burgos identifies a parallel phenomenon with respect to the composition of poetry or artwork. A creative work remains inseparable from the “processus qui l’ont vu naître et qu’elle ne cesse de contenir et prolonger virtuellement. Elle est donc nécessairement inachevée” (“processes that saw it take birth and which it never stops containing and virtually prolonging. [The artwork] is thus necessarily unaccomplished”). By developing this notion of the perpetual “unaccomplished” work, Burgos underlines the indivisible link that exists between the act of creating and the creation. Just as an identity represents an ongoing process, a work constantly remains “in progress.”

Despite the liberty associated with the unrestrained ongoing reformation of identity or of poetic literature, the resulting movement can still produce unwanted friction. For example, the irreconcilable factors that comprise the sense of self leave individuals

5 Glissant 171.


with a “conscious of duality” and “force[ ] [them] to live in the interface between the two [realities],” according to Gloria Anzaldúa. Yet, this condition results from the imposition of binaries upon such individuals. By eliminating the constraining mentality of “dichotomy,” a transcultural subject can exist at the “border-space” where the different aspects of identity can interact and coexist peacefully. Likewise for literary and visual arts, Burgos proposes destroying the “system in place” in order to promote artistic creativity. Without the elimination of convention, painters, writers, and all artists alike would fall back into “reassessement, répétition, reproduction mais jamais véritablement création” (“reassessment, repetition, reproduction but never truly creation”). The only way to achieve true creation is by transcending pre-established systems. By hurdling the boundaries of convention, Baya, Cixous, and Béji thus embrace the liberty to produce innovative works and ideas.

Bhabha also suggests a way to account for the problematic “incommensurability” of the different factors that compose a given identity. He believes that the creation of a “third space” or a new space of “hybridity” would offer room for the “other positions to emerge.” In turn, Mignolo and Schiwy envision a solution that consists of eliminating the concept of “dichotomy.” A “border-space” should exist in place of a divisive boundary so that an individual’s identity can flourish and readily assimilate the various


9 Mignolo and Schiwy 273.

10 Burgos 33.

elements that compose it.\textsuperscript{12} Just as geographical boundaries change over the course of wars and signed treaties, identity undergoes “shifting, a movement between the meanings attached to biological characteristics, between the cultural values prescribed by differing groups, and between the contradictions inherent in these values and created precisely by their intersection.”\textsuperscript{13}

Additional theoretical explorations on art by Jacques Derrida and Abdelkébir Khatibi inform how this paper will examine Baya’s artwork. The concepts of “play,” “passe-partout,” and “parergon” that Derrida introduces in “La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines” (“La structure”) and La vérité en peinture (La vérité), elucidate the evolving and indefinable quality of her paintings. The notion of “play” comes from the famous poststructuralist criticism of the shortcomings of structures in accounting for conditions that resist the systems in place.\textsuperscript{14} The latter terms “passe-partout” and “parergon” apply to Derrida’s analysis of paintings in finding the “truth of painting.” Rather than fitting inside fixed frames of interpretation, the true significance of paintings exists at the intersection of multiple factors or in the undesignated “passe-partout” space of a painting that lies between the frame and the artwork.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{12} Mignolo and Schiwy 273.

\textsuperscript{13} Mignolo and Schiwy 271-72.


Expanding on the concept of convergence, Derrida’s neologism “parergon” refers to an intermediary location that consists of a “mix of outside and inside.”

Whether referring to artworks or individuals, critics must similarly recognize the fluidity of definitions and identity. This becomes an important point that Khatibi makes in L’art contemporain arabe (L’art) and “Croisement de regards” (“Croisement”) concerning the interpretation of contemporary Arab art. Rather than corresponding to a distinct culture or tradition, twentieth-century Arab painters come from a broad range of ethnocultural origins. Likewise, Baya and her art represent a “plurality” that surpasses specific categories of art.

While using this theoretical foundation, the paper will also examine Baya, Cixous, and Béji’s motivations for painting and writing in order to maintain the distinction of each of their original contributions to the worlds of art and literature. For Cixous and Béji, some of their own essays reveal their approaches to, or objectives in, writing. As Cixous compellingly indicates in “Le rire de la Méduse” (“Le rire”), La jeune née (La jeune), and La venue à l’écriture (La venue), writing becomes a political feminist weapon. In order for women to escape the imposed gendered role of passivity and

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16 La vérité 74.


19 Khatibi, “Croisement” 21. Translations of Khatibi’s quotations now and hereinafter are mine.


silence, they must write. Rather than conforming to the Laws that the patriarchal literary tradition has established, feminine writing should “blow up” the Law by launching an alternative creative form of literature. Moreover, through determined persistence that may require crossing “deserts [. . .] regions in flames, [ ] regions iced over[,]” and dying multiple deaths, they will break free from their gendered role and arrive at the “right birth.”

Although Cixous no longer pushes a fervently feminist stance in her semi-autobiographical work Les rêveries de la femme sauvage (Les rêveries), she still demonstrates her unconventional form of writing that disrupts classical literary traditions as she searches for the “right birth.” To do so, she models her writing after the Brazilian writer, Clarice Lispector. Cixous’s essay “Le dernier tableau ou le portrait de Dieu” uncovers the goal of her poetic language in her fictional and semi-autobiographical texts. Just as Lispector “prétend travailler sur le geste d’écrire comme geste de peindre” (“pretends to work on the gesture of writing as a gesture of painting”) in Agua Viva, Cixous aspires to “write-paint” in her texts. This painterly approach to writing becomes evident in Les rêveries, as this paper will discuss.

In addition to offering an aesthetic dimension to writing, Cixous aims for truthful expression. As she states in her text “Difficult Joys,” “the only thing which is worth

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23 Cixous and Clément, La jeune 160.


26 Translations of quotations from Cixous’s “Le dernier” now and hereinafter are from Hélène Cixous, “Coming to Writing” and Other Essays, ed. Deborah Jenson, trans. Sarah Cornell et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

27 Cixous, “Le dernier” 172 ; Cixous, “Coming” 104.
writing” needs to be done “violently and truthfully.” She understands the challenge and necessity of all writers—men and women alike—to “deal with the truth of [their] cruelty or of [their] anger, or [their] incapacity to be fair or just, or of [their] general cowardice.”28 Les rêveries demonstrates this by exposing the injustices of humanity that the narrator had observed during her childhood in Algeria.

Although Béji also provides an honest assessment of humanity through her various essays and fictional texts, her objective for writing differs from that of Cixous. Rather than striving to blow up the Laws of conventional literature or to write violently, she focuses on analyzing and identifying the source of sociocultural malaise that she senses in Tunisia. In the essay Une force qui demeure (Une force), Béji explains her position with respect to the issues affecting Tunisian women at the start of the twenty-first century. Through her arguments, she clearly distinguishes herself from Cixous’s feminist stance by choosing to defend tradition over rebellion. At the same time, the opinions that she presents help to elucidate the themes that she introduces in an earlier semi-autobiographical fictional work, L’œil du jour (L’œil). Although Béji writes both fictional and critical essays to offer politically engaged commentaries on society, this does not prevent her from producing aesthetic works. In her text L’art contre la culture: Nūba (Nūba), she asserts that art’s function is to expose the transient moments of beauty. As this paper will demonstrate, Béji pursues artistic writing in L’œil that parallels Cixous’s attempt to “write-paint.”

Different than in the cases of Cixous and Béji, Baya’s objectives are not available in personal writings given her non-academic upbringing and her chosen medium of self-

expression: painting. While the commentaries of her critics offer some insight into the significance of her artwork, much of the criticism remains limited. In order to supplement already existing critical texts on Baya, this paper will examine available biographical information and findings from psychoanalytical studies. For example, given Baya’s premature orphanhood, the paper will consider how her paintings communicate or compensate for the trauma of losing her parents. Moreover, the analyses will examine how both the tragic and fortunate aspects of her upbringing might have influenced the originality of her work. Through these inductive approaches, this paper will try to uncover the motivations behind Baya’s art.

While identifying Baya, Cixous, and Béji’s objectives in their respective works, this study will examine how they demonstrate a “transceptive” vision and how this viewpoint influences the composition of innovative paintings and texts. Linked to Bhabha’s notion of “third space” and Mignolo and Schiwy’s concept of “border-space,” the three women adopt an alternative approach to painting and writing that overcomes binaries. From a tertiary in-between perspective, they account for the different dimensions of their unique plural identities. On the one hand, they exemplify Jean-Joseph Goux’s definition of “transjectivity.” In Oedipe philosophe, Goux argues that Oedipus moves beyond the limits of the “aspective” and “perspective” of Ancient Egyptian and Greek art by assuming a “transpective” position: the recognition of the subconscious.29 Oedipus’s actions and consequent realizations particularly indicate his awareness of the underlying influences of an inner self.30 This paper accordingly examines how the visual and literary compositions of Baya, Cixous, and Béji reflect a

30 Goux, Oedipe 133-34, 198.
transceptive vision that unveils the subconscious. Baya manifests an intuitive reality by painting gouaches that indirectly speak of fears and longings associated with her orphanhood. Cixous’s *Les rêveries* reveals the narrator’s daydreaming state through the errant flow of the book’s narrative. Likewise, through the use of wandering descriptions, Béji’s *L'œil* reflects the activities of the subconscious mind as it recalls the past.

On the other hand, these women reveal a transceptive viewpoint that crosses or transcends frames of not only culture, but also gender, time, and medium. By coming from a heritage or experiencing an upbringing that fosters transcultural awareness, individuals like Baya, Cixous, and Béji develop a vision that sees beyond the boundaries of a single culture or tradition. This form of transpectivity assumes an intermediary position that permeates set perspectives in order to expose more accurate personal and global realities. Unlike Oedipus who had been unaware of his true heritage until after he completes his prophesied actions, the current global transcultural population already recognizes the complexity of their plural roots. Nonetheless, they wrestle with problematic situations linked to their complex background: they fit neither a universal aspective mindset nor a singular perspective. Moreover, on top of acknowledging their ties to multiple cultures, they need to consider how additional factors—such as gender, nationality, race, religion, and language—compose important and dynamic characteristics of their subjectivity. By assuming a transceptive position, they can consider the intersectionality of the diverse components of their identity.

The paper will accordingly argue that the paintings and writings of Baya, Cixous, and Béji display a transceptive viewpoint that transcends the boundaries found in art, cultures, and literature. Rather than conforming to a particular art genre, Baya reinvents
an original approach to painting by blending multiple cultural traditions and techniques. Similarly, Cixous demonstrates a transceptive rewriting of the past and of a new identity by crossing conventional literary boundaries. From a transgenerational and transcultural eye, Béji’s *L’œil* re-evaluates and re-values art, culture, and tradition.

In addition to transpectivity, the notion of femininity represents another obvious aspect of identity common to the three women. While Baya, Cixous, and Béji address the issue of femininity differently in their respective works given their diverging motivations, each woman consciously or subconsciously manifests a gendered perspective. For example, Baya would not have claimed that her art engages in feminist discourse, yet her paintings appear significantly gendered. In contrast, Cixous’s 1970 French feminist reputation fades from the foreground in *Les reveries* yet still lingers in metaphoric imageries such as mothering and birthing. Then, for Béji, the debate between traditionalist and modernist feminists represents a central point of discourse in both *L’œil* and *Une force*.

This paper subsequently will make an intentionally gendered reading of the pictures and texts of Baya, Cixous, and Béji, as a means to underline the contributions that they make to the field of Women’s Studies. In particular, the paper will tackle the questions: How do their art, writing, and reflective commentaries depict femininity? How do they contribute to a new understanding of women? By exploring these questions, the three chapters will aim to show how the works of these three women contribute new insight into the role that gender plays in defining identity within their sociocultural context.
In turn, while language choice comprises another intimate facet of identity, an investigation of this complex issue would require substantial linguistic, sociopolitical, and psychoanalytical exploration that this paper will not presently undertake. The particular circumstances of Baya, Cixous, and Béji moreover minimize or complicate the role that the French language plays in defining their identities. For example, while Baya’s limited literacy and profession as an artist could translate into another form of repression, the analysis of her pictures does not focus on language given the medium of her works. Then, in Cixous’s case, she spends her childhood within a linguistically German-French household. Her translingual upbringing and the complex dynamics associated with her French nationality and her Jewish heritage, blur the function that language plays in determining her identity as colonizer or colonized.\(^{31}\) Finally, for Béji, the French language represents a compatible component of her multidimensional identity. Since she claims that the Oriental and Occidental sides of her heritage comprise “two inseparable twins” of her being, her language choice reflects a harmonious (as opposed to conflicting) relationship that she believes to characterize her transcultural subjectivity.\(^{32}\)

While examining the parallels within the biographies, works, and gendered perspectives of the three women, the study will make the following crucial considerations. First, each chapter will strive to underline the unique sociocultural context of the given individual. In this way, the paper seeks to avoid assuming that all Arab-Muslim societies are alike: a trap into which Western feminist theorists have easily fallen. Instead of studying the circumstances of Muslim women within their specific cultural-familial

\(^{31}\) The sociopolitical friction between anti-Semitism and colonial French Algeria that shapes Cixous’s vision of the French language inspires a topic of future research.

\(^{32}\) Extended research on the linguistic influence of French on Béji’s writings would also reveal new findings that could contribute to explaining the complexity of her transcultural identity.
context, the hegemonic Euro-centric mindset tends to envision all Third World women as identical sexual-political subjects, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty points out in “Under Western Eyes.” Moreover, universalizing mentalities assume that women globally share the same problems and needs when actuality proves the contrary. Other misleading conjectures consist of the “superiority” complex that Western states maintain over non-Western countries. Mohanty rightly criticizes the supposition that Western nations are more “advanced” and “evolved” than those of the Third World. She stresses the misconceptions that this type of “latent ethnocentrism in particular feminist writings on the Third World” can develop.

Accordingly, a careless application of the postmodern notions of “passe-partout” and “parergon” can lead to false conclusions. While these concepts help to illustrate how artists and writers can enjoy the transcendence of dichotomies, they can inaccurately depict identities, particularly in the oversimplification of issues concerning gender, race, and class. Many sincere yet overly generalized new definitions have been introduced through feminist studies regarding what constitutes the condition of women in the twenty-first century. Problems arise when Western feminists assign stereotypic images to non-Occidental women residing in Islamic nations or who are associated with the Orient. Instead of maintaining geographically and culturally specific perspectives, social commentators often consolidate all Muslim women in the Middle East into one

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34 Mohanty 63.

35 Mohanty 74.
generalized and inaccurate portrait. In order to avoid glossing over the distinct identities of Baya, Cixous, and Béji, the paper will try to consider the specificity of each artist and author.

Next, while respecting the individual contexts of the three women, the paper will also account for another potentially problematic circumstance: the inadequacy of national, cultural or social definitions in encompassing the complexity of the circumstances of Baya, Cixous, and Béji. Inflexible structures of classification fail to accommodate the “plurality” or “singularity” of these women, as Khatibi and Khanna insist in their texts “Croisement” and “Latent Ghosts and the Manifesto Baya, Breton and reading for the future,” respectively. Unconventional viewpoints are thus necessary when considering the themes of female subjectivity and aesthetics in the paintings and writings of Baya, Cixous, and Béji. Similarly, while identifying postmodern images that exist in their compositions, the paper will highlight the specifics of their transnational heritage. In this way, the analyses will seek to preserve the unique contributions of each individual while also illustrating how the plural background of the three women helps them to transcend the barriers of convention.

Thus, while making comparisons that underline the commonalities among Baya, Cixous, and Béji’s works, each chapter will also focus on (and thus honor) the uniqueness of each woman’s background and story. In particular, the differences in the three women’s circumstances emphasize their distinction. Their educational upbringing would

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37 21.

influence not only the mode of expression but also the inclination of each individual. For example, Baya’s sociocultural circumstance had offered her limited literacy that most likely shaped her a-political approach to painting. In contrast, the extensive academic exposure that Cixous and Béji had received helped them produce their political and critical texts. Writing functions as an instrument by which Cixous presents the injustices that she had endured while residing in Algeria. Likewise, Béji makes critical sociocultural evaluations of Tunisian society by which she identifies, analyzes, and offers solutions to the crises that Tunisians face within their decolonized modernizing existence.

In order to effectively account for the unique backgrounds and motivations of Baya, Cixous, and Béji, this study will dedicate a chapter to each woman. For example, Chapter One will first examine the ethnocultural origins of Baya in order to demonstrate how her paintings depict aspects of her heritage. Her biography exposes both the credibility and inaccuracy of the observations that critics make regarding the origins of Baya’s artwork. Likewise, a comparative analysis of both Oriental and Occidental art traditions reveals how certain elements of her art suggest characteristics of decorative and calligraphic Islamic art while other features evoke figural realism of classical Occidental art. This chapter will also make a psychoanalytical examination of Baya’s paintings with respect to her personal history. Findings from the studies of art therapy in conjunction with psychoanalytical investigations of bereaved children will shed light on Baya’s relationship to painting. Speculations on the symbolic significations of certain themes and characteristics of her artwork will similarly indicate how her pictures express the subconscious. In addition to considering the internal influences on Baya’s works, the

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39 Some records actually suggest illiteracy. For details, see Baya: Avril-juin 2003 (Arles: Musée Réattu, 2003) 79.
chapter will also explore external factors: personal experiences as well as artistic movements and political events that coincide with her generation. While these analyses may provide only a preliminary level of psychoanalytical readings of Baya’s art, they point to how her portrayal of intricate decorative motifs, the maternal embrace, and the fellowship of women and nature indirectly manifest the effects of hardships from her childhood. A more extensive psychoanalytical study could therefore inform how the designs, techniques, and images mask or compensate for the trauma and losses of her past instead of illustrating purely euphoric scenes.\textsuperscript{40}

Through a sequential reading of Baya’s pictures, the first chapter will also investigate the corresponding evolution of her identity as she fulfills her roles of wife, mother, and widow. While illustrating the emergent quality of Baya’s subjectivity, the analysis will show how her life story particularly reveals a feminine journey to self-discovery. The chapter will demonstrate how specific aspects of her paintings and her personality reinforce the gendered interpretation of Baya’s trajectory from childhood to adulthood. Likewise, her works portray a strikingly feminine re-presentation of women both in perspective and in technique thus distinguishing her from Orientalist painters. Yet the most distinctive mark that Baya leaves through her paintings concerns her ability to blend cultures, media, and time. By demonstrating a transpective eye that crosses different boundaries of perspective, she projects her singularity among artists and also finds a second birth in her art. Although Baya’s reactions to the sociopolitical conditions and events of Algeria in the mid-twentieth century could help explain her pause from art

\textsuperscript{40} Although the study touches upon this issue, it will not cover the matter thoroughly. However, this will be another topic for future research.
from 1953-63, this paper will not cover this matter due to insufficient published evidence that could help to divulge the artist's position.

Then, Chapter Two will concentrate on revealing the principal themes of Cixous's book *Les rêveries*. Linked to the leitmotif of remembering, loss becomes a prominent and recurring incident with regard to memories, a birthplace, a father, and written memoirs. In turn, remembering becomes the force that Cixous uses to counteract loss. This chapter thus aims to demonstrate how specific features of *Les rêveries*'s narrative reflect the dynamics of a daydreaming mind as it wanders from oblivion to memory: fragmented stories, an a-chronological narration, and metaphoric symbols of the past.

The second chapter will also consider how the narrator's rewriting of her childhood represents a constructive act by which she strengthens her subjectivity and ultimately reinvents her identity. The re-creative function of writing transforms traumatic episodes and images into corresponding poetic versions. In turn, a close analysis of examples of metaphoric imagery, wordplay, and neologisms will illustrate how the narrative gives birth to a body-text that conveys the author's pulsing body. Finally, the chapter will demonstrate how the book pushes creativity in another direction: the text reveals transpectivity by transcending the conventions of autobiographical writing and by unveiling complicated hidden realities of the narrator's past.

In Chapter Three, *L'œil* and *Une force* will be the central texts of analysis. The chapter will primarily study the former text to reveal Béji's approach to writing and also her intellectual insight into the sociocultural conditions of her country, Tunisia. Rather than commenting on colonial domination, she focuses on the difficult transition that the nation is facing as a decolonized state. The chapter considers how the overarching theme
of a fading history—through fragmented memories of Tunis, a disappearing heritage, and the aging grandmother—depicts the country’s current fragile condition. In fact, the paper will argue that the grandparent, the childhood home, and the public city life of Tunis represent the cultural markers of the narrator’s heritage.

This final chapter will also demonstrate how L’œil’s narrator goes beyond simply acting as a passive observer. She takes an active role of re-evaluating the persons, scenes, and events that she witnesses in her birthplace. With her re-interpretive eye, she transforms what she sees into symbolic icons and gives new meaning to central figures and details. In addition, she functions as a sociopolitical critic who reconsiders and subsequently renovates the values of her modernizing nation. The analyses thus reveal how Béji voices her critical commentary through the narrator of L’œil and thus indicates that this work signifies more than a fictional novel. Containing autobiographical undercurrents, this text communicates Béji’s own experiences as a child in Tunis and her visits back to her birthplace as an adult. At the same time, the book also includes analytical examinations of her society from a sociological viewpoint. In particular, she sets up the argument surrounding the traditionalist-modernist conflict. Yet as the chapter will illustrate, Béji continues the debate more thoroughly in Une force. An investigation of this essay’s salient points reveals Béji’s concerns about the destiny of her female contemporaries in the midst of the nation’s transition toward modernization. Une force thus proves helpful in showing how the motifs in L’œil communicate Béji’s opinions regarding the lifestyle and future of Tunisian women. Therefore, while Cixous’s semi-autobiographical work seeks to expose realities and experiences, Béji’s two books aim to evaluate the sociocultural conditions of Tunisia.
Whether by inventing new worlds through color, rewriting language or offering sociopolitical critiques, Baya, Cixous, and Béji address the dilemma of feeling disconnected from their origins. The study will illustrate how they embrace a space of creative freedom—in painting and writing—in order to “come home.” The homecoming efforts of these women represent an act of self-(re)discovery that results in their productive accomplishments. The lives and works of these individuals consequently reflect a journey from loss to the “(re)creation” of a new identity, as Rye indicates in her book *Reading for Change*.\(^{41}\) While the process involves crossing deserts, enflamed regions, and frozen landscapes, the three women ultimately arrive at their “right birth” through the creative arts of painting and writing.\(^{42}\)


\(^{42}\) Cixous et al. *La venue* 34; Cixous, “Coming” 28.
-- Chapter One --

Baya Mahieddine
Quand je peins, je suis heureuse, je suis dans un autre monde, j’oublie tout. On me dit: “Pourquoi toujours la même chose?” Je trouve que si je change, je ne serai plus Baya.43 When I paint, I am happy, I am in another world, I forget everything. They ask me: “Why always the same thing?” I find that if I change my paintings, they will no longer be mine.44

--Baya

“What is art?” “What is the origin of art or of artworks?” appropriately asks Jacques Derrida in La vérité en peinture (La vérité).45 While countless diverging responses exist that leave these foundational questions open-ended, Derrida recognizes the problems associated with art analysis. Art critics pretend to “see” or “restore” the true meaning of a work by resorting to an extremely structured “régime d’interprétation.” They believe that this “system of interpretation” represents the key to assessing the original, bare, and singular sense of the artwork.46

Despite the intentions of art evaluators to maintain an objective perspective that restores true meaning, their political positions often sway their analyses. “[T]he aesthetic remains such a problematic category for political criticism” given how art “is linked to the relationship between psychical and historical time,” states Ranjana Khanna in “Latent Ghosts and the Manifesto.”47 Perceiving the risks associated with interpreting artwork from an “already existing history of art that has been built on its own biases and colonial


44 Translations of quotations from Trois femmes now and hereinafter are mine.

45 Translations of Derrida’s quotations now and hereinafter are mine.


political disciplinary foundations,” Khanna encourages a different approach to studying art. When considering the paintings of Baya Mahieddine (born Fatma Haddad), the viewer must aim to “read[ ]” the “singularity” of this artist rather than forcing her into a preconceived structure. While following Khanna’s example of using the “frame” related to the “Derridian notions of the supplement—the par-ergon,” this chapter also attempts to recognize the political biases that could influence the interpretations of Baya’s critics. In particular, the following chapter will explore the reactions that her artwork inspires among figures like André Breton, Frank Maubert, Jean Pélégri, and Assia Djebar.

Similar to how Khanna warns against hegemonic discourse in the reading of Baya’s works, Derrida seeks to remove the limitations of convention from the interpretation of art. He proposes that the “truth in painting” occupies a nonrestrictive space between the interior and exterior of the work. Making a metaphoric reference to the “passe-partout” of a mounted 2D artwork—the “matting” that separates the frame from the composition—Derrida suggests that the truth exists in the blank interstitial section. Just as a reader might read in between the lines of a text, the viewer needs to search for meaning in this framed yet unpainted part of the painting. The ambiguous open function of the matting leaves room for imagination, for a constant “working” of the sense of the painting: “Il travaille, fait travailler, laisse travailler le cadre, lui donne à travailler.” (“It works, makes work, lets the frame work, gives [the viewer something] to

48 As indicated in Khanna 258, Baya: Avril, 79, and Baya: Peintre.
49 Khanna 272.
50 240.
work.”)\textsuperscript{51} By allowing this perpetual (re)working of the meaning of an artwork, Derrida also indicates the correlation that exists between truth and movement: truth resides in the allegorical space that undergoes constant change. In fact, this concept of the mobility of meaning corresponds with Derrida’s famous reference to the “play” within structures.\textsuperscript{52} The fluid “passe-partout” space therefore undermines formerly established binaries that attempt to contain the essence of art.\textsuperscript{53}

Expanding on this notion of “play” within art, Derrida also explains how the frame of a painting becomes a contestable site. The border no longer functions independently of the work but acts both as an exterior and interior: “c’est un parergon, un mixte de dehors et de dedans” (“it is a parergon, a mix of outside and inside”).\textsuperscript{54} Derrida invents this neologism to allude to the inseparable tie that similarly exists between the artist and the artwork concerning the origins of a painting. He emphasizes this circular relationship between the creator and the created by claiming that the artwork comes from the artist whose origins, in turn, partially originate from the artwork. The two remain necessarily interdependent.\textsuperscript{55} This chapter will thus uncover the inevitable interconnectedness between Baya and her work. Moreover, the analyses will consider how the application of “passe-partout” and the associated concept of “play” contribute to the interpretation of Baya’s paintings.

\textsuperscript{51} Derrida, \textit{La vérité} 16-17.

\textsuperscript{52} “La structure” 410.

\textsuperscript{53} Derrida, \textit{La vérité} 16-17.

\textsuperscript{54} Derrida, \textit{La vérité} 74.

\textsuperscript{55} Derrida, \textit{La vérité} 38.
While Derrida’s concepts offer useful insight in studying art from an unconventional mindset, Patricia L. Baker puts forth important considerations concerning the analysis of Islamic art. Given the limitations of archeological evidence, she argues that Westerners must beware of negligently generalizing a culture into a “recognizable historic benchmark of ‘purity.’” The lack of artifacts from a given culture could bring into question the accuracy of what constitutes “traditional” art or cultures. The same holds true for distinguishing an “essential character” of Islamic art. For example, Islamic art had not always been purely nonfigurative. While the hadiths express warnings to anyone who tries to “imitate or usurp Divine Creation,” the Quran itself indicates nothing regarding figural art. This resistance to figural portrayal had not materialized until about 632 AD: a century after the Prophet Muhammad’s death. Islamic work that excludes representations of terrestrial images makes up only a portion of a diverse collection of Islamic artwork. Baker thus insists on careful usage of terms such as “traditional” or “essential.” Instead of making such generalizations, the viewer should make geographically and historically specific observations regarding artwork including explicit definitions of obscure terminology.

Like Baker, Khatibi also underlines the complexity of Arab art and thus warns against placing limits on cultural constructs. In fact, the border that supposedly separates Occidental art from Islamic art proves to be permeable. On the one hand, ancient Islamic art and Occidental art have taken different trajectories in order to arrive at their

57 Baker 37.
58 Baker 11-12.
abstractionist approaches to art. Each art culture possesses a unique history that leads to
the production of abstract art. On the other, all art, regardless of origin, tends toward
Islamic abstractionism without falling into the category of Islamic art. In turn, when
trying to determine what constitutes Arab art, Khatibi realizes the broadness of the
cultural category with regard to ethnicity, religion, and nationality. He thus stresses the
importance of acknowledging the “plurality” of Arabic painting. The multifaceted
quality of Arab art necessarily encompasses an “internationality” that includes features of
Occidental painting.

Taking into account both Baker and Khatibi’s observations, this chapter also aims
to preserve Baya’s “singularity” according to Khanna’s recommendation. When
allusions are made to “traditional” style or to a “purity” of color or form, they will refer
to the style, color or form of decorative and geometric techniques that characterize
nonfigural or calligraphic Islamic art. In turn, the chapter will analyze the commentaries
of Baya’s critics from a culturally specific position that recognizes her Arab-Kabyle-
Berber Algerian heritage. At the same time, the study will demonstrate that the unique
“alterity” of Baya’s paintings lies in the plurality that they evoke.

Although this chapter will not answer the question “What is the origin of art or of
artworks?” it will attempt to show what Baya’s art reveals about her origins and her life
as a female Algerian artist. It will moreover argue that the singularity and plurality of


62 Khanna 271-72.
Baya’s paintings come from the depiction of a transpective vision that transcends the boundaries of perspective, culture, medium, and time. While this section will not define what art is, it will examine the function of painting in Baya’s identity re-formation. In particular, the chapter will consider how her art reflects a feminine trajectory that leads to her “right birth.”

A Souk of Happy Arabia

Baya offers simple explanations for the subject matter that she chooses to paint: “Pourquoi les oiseaux?” me dit-on. Eh bien, j’aime les oiseaux. Pourquoi les papillons? Eh bien, parce que j’aime les papillons. Pour tout cela, je ne donne pas de thème” (“Why birds?” one asks me. Well, I like birds. ‘Why butterflies?’ Well, because I like butterflies. For all that, I do not give a theme”). While the responses could not be any simpler, they offer little information about the complex origins of Baya and of her art. This section thus proposes a study of Baya’s biography that contextualizes her art within her Arab-Kabyle-Berber Algerian background. On the one hand, her early orphanhood and her subsequent childhood among multiple surrogate mothers suggest that she had experienced significant dissociation from her heritage. On the other, a comparison between her paintings and her ethnocultural origins conveys curious stylistic and

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63 *Trois femmes* 19.
thematic parallels. As the critic Jean Pélégri questions: "Quel est donc le secret de Baya?" ("So what is the secret of Baya?").

Regardless of Baya’s comments, artists and art historians believe that the scenes that she paints represent more than her animals or trees of preference. Her pictures portray forms and patterns that indicate her ethnocultural ties to a North African cultural background. Moreover, the interlacing vegetal motifs, colorful exotic birds, and intricately embellished dresses of the women evoke some features of Islamic art that precedes Baya by four hundred to one thousand years. Curiously, despite the commonalities that Baya’s paintings have with motifs and decorative styles of North African art, little evidence exists to indicate that she had had much exposure to arabesque or Islamic arts in Algeria. Rather, the personal history of this artist reveals an upbringing filled with significant hardship and transitions. Born in 1931 in Fort de l’Eau (today Bordj-el-Kifan) near Algiers in a “little tribe far from the village,” she became orphaned five years later.

The extreme poverty that was characteristic of Baya’s birth region, Kabylie, at the time of her infancy gives some explanation of the cause of death of her parents. Although available literature tells very little of the events of the tragedy, Jean Peyrissac offers some details of the unfortunate circumstance: “Après le père, la mère à l’agonie avait gardé Baya tout contre elle jusque dans la mort” (“After the father, the


65 Baya: “L’orient des provençaux”: novembre 82-février 83 (Marseille : Musée Cantini, 1983) 15. Translations of quotations from Baya: “L’orient” now and hereinafter are mine.

66 Trois femmes 17.
mother [even] in her agony had held Baya tightly against her until her [own] death”). While various sources give different information about when Baya’s parents pass away, two confirm that the father had passed away in 1936. The same records indicate that the mother remarried with a man who had twelve children and who had treated Baya poorly. When the mother then died in 1942, she left Baya greatly traumatized and in the care of her paternal grandmother. While the orphan retained only vague recollections of her father, she claimed to have “[kept] a pretty precise image” of her biological mother.  

The grandmother then assumed care of Baya in 1942, although without much tenderness. As a domestic worker for rich colonial families, the grandparent took Baya with her to these homes. A sister of one of the wealthy landowners, the Frenchwoman Marguerite Caminat (who later remarried as Marguerite Benhoura) noticed Baya as she molded various figures out of soil. While some sources claim that Marguerite had taken Baya in as a servant or a domestic worker, other records defend the adoptive parent as the orphan’s “protector” or benefactor. The Algerian-born artist possessed Arab-Kabyle-Berber roots according to documents that refer to her heritage. With regard to the modest origins of Baya, Frank Maubert states with amazement, “Baya est née artiste, sans apprentissage, sans culture” (“Baya is born an artist, without apprenticeship, without

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69 Baya: Avril 79.

70 Baya: Avril 7; Baya: “L’orient” 15.

71 Baya: “L’orient” 15; Khanna 261.
Likewise, Pélégri wonders how a girl, who had never seen artwork that depicted the forms and colors of Ancient Egypt, Crete, and Sumer, could still manage to recover a style that recalls the "arabesque." These comments attempt to highlight Baya’s unusual accomplishment through her art, yet they overlook certain details of her life that explain why her paintings might include North African and Islamic art themes.

Even with Baya’s fragile ties to her cultural background, is she really “without culture” as Maubert presumes or as oblivious to arabesque motifs as Pélégri proposes? The critics assume that Baya—an Arab-Kabyle-Berber orphaned girl who barely survived destitution—would never have been cultured enough to deliberately recognize or produce art motifs that reflected her cultural heritage. Although Baya did reside in the home of a French surrogate mother, she still remained in Algeria. In her everyday existence, she would naturally have been exposed to cultural traditions specific to Arab, Kabyle-Berber, and Muslim people of her nation. For this reason, her ability to evoke “North African folklore” through painting seems more anticipated than what her commentators suppose.

In turn, as Baya grew up under the care of her adoptive French parent, the new home proved to be significantly influential in initiating her art. Marguerite’s own investment in painting, both in practice and in her network with the Occidental art world, inspired Baya to paint. Baya had watched her French mother paint flowers and birds, and developed the motivation to paint shortly after. Although Baya admitted to receiving feedback about her work from Marguerite, she did not confirm that this woman had

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73 10.

74 Maubert 8.
significantly impacted her art.\textsuperscript{75} Regardless of the level of instructional influence that Marguerite had (not) had on Baya, she clearly motivated her adopted child to pursue art.\textsuperscript{76}

Even with the substantial impact that Marguerite had made on Baya’s initiation into painting, the highly changeable environment of the orphan’s early childhood undoubtedly destabilized her connection with her ethnocultural roots. “[A]ppartenance à une terre, à une nation, à une identité” (“belonging to a land, a nation, [and] an identity”) consequently becomes a question for her rather than an answer, as Khatibi claims.\textsuperscript{77} Painting represents a gesture by which Baya questions and addresses the dilemma of belonging. Her ties to her origins become increasingly unknown as she enters into adolescence. Having lost contact with her immediate lineage at a young age, she becomes even more distanced from her ethnic background and culture under Marguerite. She grows up as a child of no one yet simultaneously as a child of many.

Intuitively or coincidentally, Baya had painted scenes that continue to give her critics the impression of entering into Arabia. Upon seeing Baya’s works, Breton famously compares her painted world to a nostalgic lost paradise: “happy Arabia.”\textsuperscript{78} The public glimpses a “mémoire d’un people, d’une peintre et de son voyage dans le temps, comme si le spectateur était dans un souk Oriental” (“memory of a people, of a painter and her voyage in time, as if the viewer was inside an Oriental souk”).\textsuperscript{79} Yet, instead of

\textsuperscript{75} Khanna 258-61.

\textsuperscript{76} Jean Sénac, \textit{Visages d’Algérie} (Paris: Paris-Méditerranée, 2002) 224. The literacy of Baya remains debatable. The only recorded writings by Baya are signatures or the brief note that she had written to Sénac on the back of a magazine.

\textsuperscript{77} “Croisement” 22.

displaying the intricate and colorful handicraft of a "souk," the paintings offer meticulous details of vegetation, animals, and extravagant dresses of posed women. Baya’s pictures replace the intoxicating scented oils with the mesmerizing effect of enchanting colors that move her public. The hues of mauve thus provoke Pélégrí’s melancholy of Algeria, while the blue, green, and ochre call back his childhood in the "lost paradise." Lavishly colored interior furnishings, reclining women, and village landscapes indicate the scenes that were familiar to Baya from her native Algeria.

While evoking Baya’s birthplace and married life, some characteristics of her artwork also resemble aspects of "Muslim aesthetic," as Maubert specifies. The color, shape, and decoration that Baya uses in her paintings evoke ornamental patterns found in Islamic tile, textile, and ceramic art. Khatibi notes that the bright colors and distinct forms of Baya’s pictures seem to imitate the aesthetics of nonfigurative Muslim artwork. Pure color and forms had emerged as prominent features of religious artwork of North African and Middle Eastern Muslim countries. Instead of resorting to figurative compositions, calligraphic Islamic artists focused on developing "pure sign, form, [and] color." The hadiths—the interpretive texts of the Quran—influenced the emergence of abstract art among Muslim artists. The sacred supplemental writings communicate a

79 Khatibi, "Croisement" 22.
80 In Algeria, a "souk" is a shop where merchants sell various items including perfumes, accessories, decorative articles, etc.
81 8.
82 8.
83 Khatibi, "Croisement" 20.
strong disapproval of the reproduction of Allah or of his creation. This consequently had provoked an “iconophobic” or “iconoclastic” approach to art.  

While the identification of Islamic art as iconoclastic results from an observable practice among Muslim artists, an absolute claim as such proves problematic when considering the history of visual arts in Islam. Conflicting perspectives arose regarding the portrayal of iconic images. For example, the interdiction of figurative images applied particularly to objects of worship and icons that contain symbolic dimensions that try to imitate Allah’s glory within the terrestrial realm. Also, the discouragement of figural representation came from the hadiths rather than directly from the Quran. Moreover, while Islamic artists had received warnings in the hadiths against “imitat[ing] or usurp[ing] ‘Divine Creation,’” the same texts also contained instances where Muhammad favored certain figural representations of Mary and Jesus. The degree of acceptable figural representation in the tradition of Islamic art thus varied between given regions according to the rulings of the “prevailing law school.”

Where theological laws of Islam did prohibit the creation of icons that depicted the visible world, imagination played an integral role in determining artistic representations. Through the elimination of figurative or anthropomorphic (tashbih) figures and the incorporation of fantastical motifs, the artist tried to indicate a divine form

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85 Baker 47.

86 Baker 37.

87 Baker 38.

88 Meddeb 64.
of abstraction or transcendence (\textit{tanzil}).\textsuperscript{89} Based on the notion of Allah as an absolute supremacy as the Creator of all, his image could only exist within the imaginary.\textsuperscript{90} The abstract depiction of the Divine moreover needed to be infinite and indefinite. Yet the conflicting finite perspective of humans required the Divine to appear within “des limites définies, dans des frontières, des contours (\textit{hadd})” (“defined limits, in the borders, in the contours”).\textsuperscript{91} The closest that an artist could therefore come to capturing Allah’s glory and to “record precisely [his] divine Revelation” was through the perfection of the “art of writing and the production and embellishment of [Quranic] manuscripts.” For this reason, calligraphers incorporated significant decoration and illustration in their sacred texts in order to exemplify the greatness of the Quranic Revelation. The resulting embellishment or decoration included an impressive mastery of “calligraphy, illumination, gilding,” and “illustration”: ornamental and intricate masterpieces that enveloped the Quranic texts.\textsuperscript{92}

Although Baya’s paintings include figural images that diverge from iconoclastic representations, the embellished background, decorative clothing of women, and meticulous detail of the flora and fauna suggest the elaborate work of Islamic calligraphers. For example, in \textit{Femme et oiseau bleu} (“Woman and blue bird”; 1947), the swirling lines that decorate the torso and the arms of the mother figure\textsuperscript{93} follow the contour of her body yet with a distinctive movement that imitates the flow of an Arabic

\textsuperscript{89} Meddeb 55-56.

\textsuperscript{90} Meddeb 64.

\textsuperscript{91} Meddeb 55-56.


\textsuperscript{93} This chapter will explain the symbolic significance of the maternal image of the woman in this painting shortly.
The undulating outlines and body postures evoke the embroidered calligraphic
texts of Islamic artists. Furthermore, while emulating such scriptural artwork, the
decorative focus of Baya’s work reflects the ornamentation characteristic of the cultural
construct of the arabesque. The ornate design—typically visible in ceramics, tiles,
textiles, and miniatures of Islamic art—manifests itself in cultural artifacts from several
Muslim nations and predominantly uses vegetal motifs to convey sinuous movement and
animation. The intertwining branches thus illustrate an uninterrupted and unending
rhythm that imitates the melody of Arabic music.

A majority of Baya’s paintings demonstrate a similar dynamic motif that draws on
floral decoration typical of Iran’s development of Islamic art. The involved patterns,
particularly in the form of vegetation, indicate arabesque embellishment. The winding
contours and lines in 1947 works such as Village et colline (“Village and hill”), Femme
dansant (“Dancing woman”), Personnage et oiseau rouge (“Personage and red bird”),
and Femme et oiseau bleu (“Woman and blue bird”) depict a sense of continuous
motion. The style recalls both nonfigurative and figural Islamic art by blending vegetal,
geometric, bestial, and anthropomorphic motifs. Whether or not Baya had received
formal apprenticeship or cultural formation, her art skillfully re-ewokes certain elements

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94 Translations of the titles of Baya’s paintings now and hereinafter are mine.

95 Arabesque art also appeared in Persian, Turkish and Indian artwork.


97 Paintings come from the collection in Baya: Gouaches 1947.

98 Khatibi, “Croisement” 22.
of the Islamic art traditions located in North Africa and addresses the question of her belonging to a land, nation, and identity.

**Bi-pictura**

While Baya’s gouaches contain artistic techniques that suggest her ties to North African folkloric cultural history and to techniques manifested in Islamic art, her work also suggests Occidental abstractionist and realist features. This section of the chapter will consider the phenomenon of merging cultures that Khatibi identifies among contemporary Arab artists and how this condition applies to Baya’s art. In particular, it will examine how her use of pure color and geometric shapes evokes the convergence of Oriental and Occidental abstract arts while also conveying a unique form of “realism.” The analysis will take into account external factors (visits to art studios in France, European abstractionist movements, and the death of the artist’s husband) that may have influenced the evolution of her paintings. Finally, the investigation of transcultural factors that acted upon Baya’s life will help inform the unclassifiable quality of her works.

A closer examination of Baya’s upbringing reveals the opportunities that had been available to her to observe twentieth-century Occidental art. Having spent time in France (in Vallauris), Baya undoubtedly glimpsed the works of other Western artists such as Picasso. Also, her life with Marguerite—a painter well acquainted with the French art world—exposed her to works by Braque and Matisse, some of which hung within her residence. Although Baya did not enter the popular art world until the 1940s, Marguerite’s association with various European modernist painters most likely
familiarized Baya with major art trends of her time. Moreover, placed within the
corresponding timeframe of the European art world, Baya's semi-figural and semi-
geometric style corresponds to the art movements taking place in France that barely
preceded her time. Like the artists engaged in surrealist and abstractionist movements in
the 1930s, she introduced a new form of art.

By the 1930s, the famous Ecole de Paris had been formed, functioning as an art
refuge for artists both nationally and internationally, and as a fertile ground for
modernism. While political and cultural tensions were creating binaries that
complicated the notion of what constituted art, individuals such as Paul Aragon and
Ferdinand Léger sought a middle ground of "new realism" that attempted to combine
modernity with realism in order to offer a form of modern art accessible to the general
public. Aragon aimed to represent "human life" within the context of building a "new
world" while Léger borrowed the "aesthetic machine" of the industrial world. Similarly, surrealist art tended to "blur the boundaries between modern art and mass
culture" by using real objects to create unexpected or disorienting images. Yet unlike
these politically and culturally engaged new realists and surrealists, Baya created new art
by painting from her imagination for herself. When Galerie Maeght held Baya's first
major exhibition in 1947, the show thus landed in the midst of a transitional decade from
realism to abstractionism during which artists and intellectuals enthusiastically welcomed
her work.

100 Wood, ed. 31.
101 Wood, ed. 18.
Whether or not Baya’s art had been impacted by the activities of Ecole de Paris, the mixing of Baya’s Oriental heritage with Occidental art techniques (realism and figural representation) illustrates an artistic development that Khatibi identifies among “contemporary Arab artists.” He notices a trend of hybrid art that he names “bipictura.” Paintings that contain both signs and images—two features characteristic of calligraphic nonfigurative Islamic and figurative Occidental art, respectively—exemplify such bicultural works. An inter-borrowing between the two artistic traditions takes place thus signaling the two-way road that exists in the art world. Just as early twentieth-century European artists modernized their style through the exploration of classical Oriental art, contemporary Arab art also made discoveries of Occidental art and abstraction. In fact, Khatibi proposes that both Arab and non-Arab artists return to the techniques of ancient Islamic art while also making a “découverte de l’art occidental et de son abstraction” (“discovery of Occidental art and its abstraction”).

At the same time, Khatibi also distinguishes between Oriental and Occidental abstraction. He points out that the former stems from a “civilisation du signe, ou le livre, avec sa calligraphie et ses puissances décoratives, est demeuré le temple scripturaire que donne sens à toute autre visualisation” (“civilization of sign, where the book, with its calligraphy and its decorative power, is lived within as the scriptural temple that defines all other mental images”). This form of abstraction consists of “pure and geometric forms” that significantly differs in aesthetic content from the Occidental counterpart.

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102 Khatibi, “Croisement” 20.
103 Khatibi, L’art contemporain 8, 11.
104 Khatibi, L’art contemporain 10.
And even within the Oriental tradition of abstract art, divergent sub-traditions existed: the arabesque pattern actually stood alone as a branch of abstraction that translated signs into images.\(^{105}\)

In turn, Occidental abstract art follows a different historical trajectory that consequently produced another version of abstractionism. Techniques of Occidental art consisted of moving toward a “civilisation mondialisante de l’intersigne” (“globalizing civilization of ‘intersign’”) where “l’image, le signe, le son, les techno-sciences lui proposent un nouveau laboratoire.” This “new laboratory” experimented with image, sign, sound, and technological sciences, while “l’immatériel y rivalise avec l’amour fétichiste de l’artiste pour la matière, les produits et les supports traditionnels” (“the immaterial rivals with the fetishistic love of the artist for the material, traditional products, and bases”). Arab painters who tried to adopt such globalizing “intersigns” characteristic of the Occidental “new laboratory” moved away from an art-of-heritage and plunged into the complicated global civilization. They tried fusing the ideology of “immaterial” with their fetishism for the traditional materials, products, and foundations available to them in their geographical context.\(^ {106}\) Perceiving this transnational artistic movement, Khatibi claims that at the turn of the twentieth century, European art sought to invent modernity while the Orient had just begun experimenting with figuration with an “incessant return to abstraction.”\(^ {107}\) Crossing into the cultural-artistic frame of the other, the two traditions thus demonstrate a mutual convergence.


\(^{106}\) Khatibi, *L’art contemporain* 11-12.

\(^{107}\) Khatibi, *L’art contemporain* 36.
Baya’s gouaches in turn appear to echo the intersecting trajectories of the Oriental and Occidental artists. Her bicultural upbringing—under both Algerian and French surrogate parents—helps to explain the “bi-pictura” quality of her paintings. She intermingles artistic features from both the North African Islamic Orient and the European Occident. Borrowing patterns and nonfigural shapes from the “Oriental tradition of decoration,” she blends it with the figural “Occidental tradition of realism.”\(^{108}\) Her work reflects her Muslim Arab-Kabyle-Berber heritage while also suggesting characteristics that correspond to Occidental modern art. She consequently demonstrates a “plurality” that features the intersection of multiple “painters, cultures, countries, and traditions” often visible in Arab painting.\(^{109}\)

Although distinct delineations of artistic traditions allow for simpler analyses of transcultural art, the convergence of two art cultures—in abstractionism for example—also reveals the challenges of defining Baya’s artwork with pre-established art terminologies. Depending on the interpretation of the viewer, the abstract characteristics of her gouaches could suggest classical Oriental abstract art or modern Occidental abstractionism. For this reason, Khatibi appropriately signals the danger of defining “contemporary” or “modern” art according to a Eurocentric mindset. Features such as “autonomy of color,” “purity of forms,”\(^ {110}\) and a “decorative” focus that evoke European modernist qualities also refer to themes visible in premodern architectural and

\(^{108}\) Maubert 8. “Classical” as used here concerns the realist techniques that pervaded Occidental art prior to the modernist abstractionist movements of the early twentieth century.


\(^{110}\) “Purity” of form as defined by modernist painters tended toward geometric representation.
calligraphic Islamic work. While Baya’s semi-abstract approach to painting suggests both Oriental and Occidental art, the concepts of “traditional” and “contemporary” prove to be interchangeable depending on the cultural perspective. Although nonfigurative decorative art can denote the classical quality of Islamic art, the corresponding techniques of pure color and geometric form become “contemporary” when adopted by early twentieth-century European artists.

For this reason, critics claim that Baya’s paintings portray what European modernist painters were attempting to develop while her use of pure color and geometric forms also simultaneously suggest styles and colors of decorative Islamic Art. From a Eurocentric perspective, pure color and geometric representation suggest a contemporary quality visible in the works of Matisse. Yet from Khatibi’s position, the same techniques exemplify the iconoclastic ornamental qualities of Islamic art. The concept of “parergon”—the mixing of inside and outside—thus helps to explain the unclassifiable aspect of Baya’s pictures. The boundaries that separate domestic from foreign and the Orient from the Occident therefore appear to disintegrate in her works.

Given the difficulties of defining Baya’s gouaches with respect to cultural traditions, analyses of fundamental visual elements like color and form offer alternative interpretations of her works. For example, the attributes of specific colors and semigraphical images of her paintings deviate from the conventional significance of colors and shapes, as Pélégri insists. Baya adds a sense of boldness and harmony to the persons and

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111 Khatibi, L’art contemporain 7-8.


113 Maisonneul believes that Baya’s works parallel “les dernières recherches de Matisse” (“Matisse’s last pursuits”; Pélégri 10).
objects by color alone. In the reverse sense of Rimbaud with his vowels, she gives "a sense [and] [ ] significance" to color.\textsuperscript{114} Although a "colour cosmology" exists in Islamic art that corresponds to "seven stages of spiritual development," Baya's use of colors remains independent of the color system.\textsuperscript{115} Instead of depending on pre-established symbolism, she liberates color through her autonomous expressive freedom. Her colors thus act as wildcards, evoking indiscriminate feelings and meanings that correspond to the scene or situation of the given picture and to the personal experiences of the viewer.

In addition to giving autonomous expression to color, Baya's art insinuates abstraction through the transformation of persons and objects into simplified shapes that suggest experimentation with geometric or pure form. The modified outlines of the subjects in her gouaches depict nonfigural images that defy realistic representation. For example, in \textit{Trois femmes et papillons} ("Three women and butterflies"; 1947), the forms that constitute the arms and hands of her subjects appear disconnected from the torso and thus seem to function independently of the body. In \textit{Deux femmes fond bleu foncé} ("Two women and dark blue background"; 1947), the clear distinction of the women's lips and hair produce the illusion of detachment rather than being a continuation of the body. The fragmented depiction of the women thus portrays de-formation that borders on abstractionism.

Likewise, in the bottom left and right corners of the painting \textit{Bouquet entre oiseaux et mandores} ("Bouquet between birds and mandores"; 1966), Baya distorts the

\textsuperscript{114} Pélégri 6.

\textsuperscript{115} Little evidence shows this color-coding to be universal (Baker 39).
bowls into oval-shaped objects to the point of making them unidentifiable. Similarly, in front of each pink bird, she paints images that represent green vases that almost lose their functional identity: what they represent or what they hold remains unclear. This interplay between figurative and nonfigurative representation increasingly characterizes her art in her later works starting from the 1960s. In *Les poissons* ("Fish"; 1976), the asymmetry, use of decorative lines, circles, and dots evoke an arabesque composition. Only the title and the suggested eyes of the "fish" seem to denote the creatures that Baya had intended to illustrate. Without a reference to the subject matter, the painting could represent a purely abstract work. This nonfigural tendency of Baya’s works may evoke certain characteristics of Islamic art, yet the motivation behind her abstract imagery and decorative patterns differs from that of the ancient Muslim artists. While the latter attempted to portray the greatness of the Divine and his creation through abstract images, the former exploits her creative imagination without giving her work a particular “theme” or purpose.\(^{117}\)

Although Baya produces works that reinvent rather than imitate art traditions, a comparison of Baya’s later pictures to the artwork featured by European modernist movements reveals a curious parallel. European modernists were producing “all over” abstract art in the late 1940s to the 1950s. In turn, Baya’s artwork headed toward pure abstraction just a decade later.\(^{118}\) Moreover, the progression toward nonfigural art in both cases echoes Khatibi’s proposition: all art returns to Islamic abstractionism while also

\(^{116}\) A “mandore” is an ancient stringed instrument similar to the lute (“Mandore”).

\(^{117}\) *Trois femmes* 19.

\(^{118}\) Wood, ed. 102. This is evident in “Les poissons” (“Fish”) as this chapter will explain shortly.
passing by the way of Occidental abstractionism.\textsuperscript{119} Whether due to Baya’s motivation to experiment with nonrepresentational expression or due to the impact of her travels and life experiences, her paintings portray an image of plurality.

\textbf{Transceptive Borderland}

On the one hand, Baya’s artwork displays a personal history that manifests her ethnocultural background and bicultural upbringing. On the other, her paintings function more than as a mirror of the past. She transcends the imagination of art historians and the classifications of art traditions. Critics attempt to categorize her accomplishments by ascribing qualities such as “a-temporal” and “surrealist,”\textsuperscript{120} “frail and strong,”\textsuperscript{121} “naive,” “primitive,” and “féerique” (“fairy-like”)\textsuperscript{122} to her and her art. Each of these adjectives illustrates a confining subjective reading: a trap against which Khanna warns the public concerning the imposition of an “already existing history of art” upon Baya.\textsuperscript{123} The diverging opinions, however, still reveal the plurality and the transceptive nature of Baya’s singularity.\textsuperscript{124}

As this chapter has already illustrated, Baya evokes the concept of “passe-partout” by challenging and surpassing the definitions that convention attempts to establish. The

\textsuperscript{119} \textit{L’art contemporain} 10-11.

\textsuperscript{120} Pélegri 10.

\textsuperscript{121} \textit{Trois femmes} 18.

\textsuperscript{122} Khatibi, \textit{L’art contemporain} 79.

\textsuperscript{123} 272.

\textsuperscript{124} The final subsection of this chapter will define and expand on this notion of the transceptive quality of Baya’s work.
Derridian notion explains not only the plural nature of her artwork, but also its transgressive quality. Baya displays a transpectivity that partly corresponds to Goux’s definition and partly reflects a viewpoint that crosses multiple boundaries or categories. This section of the chapter thus will define the different forms of transpection that Baya demonstrates in her paintings. From a psychoanalytical position, her art exposes aspects of the subconscious that communicates situations from her orphanhood. Yet her art also projects a transpection in the sense that the works portray blended perspectives, media, and realities.

Instead of being limited to an aspective neutral vision of the world typical of ancient Egyptian art or to a singular perspective characteristic of Greek art, Baya permeates the borders of the two viewpoints and presents a transpective vision that accounts for both.\(^{125}\) As the previous subsection demonstrated, she interweaves aspective and perspective standpoints by uniting the two cultures of her transnational heritage: the Arab-Kabyle-Berber Orient with the European Occident. Her artwork consequently represents a transpective position that blends the separate traditions. This interpretation moreover stresses that rather than being “without culture,” Baya is associated with multiple cultures. Just as Khatibi explains how contemporary Arab art can act as a “frontalière entre le signe et la couleur, entre l’ornementation et l’abstraction” (“border between sign and color, between ornamentation and abstraction”), Baya assumes this mediating role as a painter.\(^{126}\) With her transpectivity, she creates links between civilizations and beings. She produces works that represent a border region between two


\(^{126}\) Khatibi, “Croisement” 20.
elements, whether cultures, nations, or time periods. Her paintings illustrate a “passe-partout” or borderland art. They reflect an un-categorizable art space of convergence just as the “passe-partout” represents the undesignated space between the frame and the artwork.

In turn, through Baya’s transjective art, she portrays a “third space” that Homi Bhabha claims to be necessary for transnational individuals. People who share Baya’s complex identity require a neutral space within which they can “negotiate and translate their cultural identities in a discontinuous intertextual temporality of cultural difference.” For Baya, painting becomes this tertiary space by offering her an intermediary place between cultures, genres, and perspectives that represents “an acknowledgement of the disjunctive cultural ‘signs’ of these [postmodern] times.” By providing room for flexibility that convention lacks, this imaginary location adopts interstitial and unconventional identities. It accounts for the changeability of cultural “meaning and symbols” where “even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.” The rereading of traditional structures and meanings becomes necessary in the interpretation of Baya’s art. By recognizing her transjective position, critics allow freedom for creativity and newness rather than trying to force her into traditional or obsolete categories. This represents a step toward unraveling the mystery surrounding Baya’s “undecipherable” work. While occupying a borderland, Baya’s artwork reveals another dimension of transpectivity that depicts aspects of the

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127 Homi K Bhabha, Location of culture (London: Routledge, 1994) 55.

128 Bhabha 317.

129 Peyrissac 15.
artist's unconscious self. The earlier analyses and psychotherapy of her art have already illustrated the symbolic implications of the "hatred of emptiness," "North African folklore," maternal embraces, art of "Ancient Egypt," the "arabesque," ornamentation, and Islamic art. These interpretations indicate her deeper intuitive awareness: an unconscious perceptivity of a subconscious self.

Through painting, Baya not only crosses these different distinctions associated with social, cultural, imaginary, and unconscious realms, but also the boundaries between different media: she creates a transjective intermediary medium. Playing with the notion of how painting can represent calligraphic writing, Khatibi explains that the imagination of the Orient exists within the "writing" of an Arab painter. According to Khatibi's interpretation of contemporary Arab art as a form of calligraphy, Baya becomes a painter-writer who likewise combines the two forms of expression. The geometric style and the arabesque decoration of Baya's works suggest calligraphic Islamic art. Just as nonfigurative Arab and Islamic artists had transformed religious script into Islamic art, Baya converges her style of painting with that of writing. Although calligraphic art is one of the most ancient Islamic art forms, Baya introduces her own version of writing-painting.

Similarly suggesting Islamic writing, Baya's gouache Les poissons ("Fish"; 1976) intriguingly echoes the signature that she leaves in the bottom left corner of her painting. An analysis of her autograph actually reveals the ambiguity of what the letters spell out:

130 Maubert 8.
131 Pélegri 10.
132 "Croisement" 22-23.
133 Baker 53.
“On the occasions where she does sign her work, it is difficult to read, as if playing with a Tamazigh or Tifinagh script as well as adulterating an Arabic Roman script with ‘Fatma.’ Whatever the signature is, it is not clearly the name Baya.”\textsuperscript{134} Nonetheless, the designs that Baya incorporates into Les poissons imitate the shape and markings of her name: the circles, dots and undulating lines become the trademark of both the artist’s autograph and her work. Accomplishing the inverse of Cixous who claims to “écrire en direction de la peinture” (‘write in the direction of painting’), Baya paints in the direction of writing.\textsuperscript{135} She appears to touch both media by creating a movement of fluidity in her paintings. Whether or not Baya’s inclination to reinvent calligraphic writing was voluntary, the gesture reinforces the claims made about her illiteracy. Although Jean Sénac states in Visages d’Algérie that Baya had written a one-sentence note to him,\textsuperscript{136} many other records claim that she was illiterate.\textsuperscript{137} Through art, she not only adds newness to painting but also introduces a personal language through her rendition of Arabic calligraphy.

In addition to combining painting and writing, Baya offers another transceptive reality by depicting a nostalgic yet foreign world. The tension between the familiar and unknown explain the enigma that critics associate with her pictures. The autonomy and originality with which Baya paints not only evoke the lost paradise of Arabia, but also extend a new vision of the world to her viewers. As Pélégri indicates: “C’est peut-être là

\textsuperscript{134} Khanna 258. Baya was born Fatma Haddad before receiving the pseudonym Baya.


\textsuperscript{136} 224.

\textsuperscript{137} Baya: Avril 79.
une des fonctions de la peinture de Baya. Par ses formes et ses couleurs, elle nous donne une autre image du monde” ("That may be one of the functions of Baya’s paintings. By her forms and colors, she gives an/other image of the world").

She re-teaches her public how to see their surroundings in bright colors and with an optimism that the mediocrities of daily life have bleached out. Baya sees beyond the superficial and monotonous appearance of her surroundings and gives a new image and meaning to existence.

While Baya’s gouches renovate reality, they also transcend time. The transectivity of her pictures renders them “a-temporal”: they fail to fit within a single timeframe. Baya appears to incorporate techniques from both ancient and contemporary art of multiple cultural traditions. Thus suggesting a multi-temporal and multicultural setting in her artwork, she transcends human time. By depicting scenes that escape earthly existence, she creates a meta-temporal environment. Pictures like *Poissons dans les eaux* ("Fish in the waters"; 1966) ascend to the metaphysical moment of Genesis of humankind. They also depict a “commencement” through which the artist introduces another imaginary existence: a new world filled with women, flora, and fauna living together in unity and in “harmony.”

Baya’s vivid colors and curious imaginary creatures evoke an “inscription archétypale, équivalente à un souvenir du paradis” ("archetypal inscription, equal to the memory of paradise").

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138 12.

139 Pélegri 10.

140 Breton 11; Khatibi, *L’art contemporain* 80.

141 Breton 13. Beyond merely recognizing the talent of Baya, Breton has other motivations for his interest in this painter. He and his surrealist contemporaries had been supporting an “anti-colonialist” stance from
Baya paints scenes that evoke the paradise linked to the Quranic account of the birth of life. The imagery of paradise that Breton and Khatibi identify in the flourishing wilderness of Baya’s pictures appropriately parallels the “gardens of paradise” that the Quran describes. According to the respective allusions to paradise, “lush greenery” and “fountains of crystal-clear running water” characterize this divine utopia. For this reason, gardens containing vegetation and birds become metaphors for the heavenly Garden for late-medieval Sufi poets.\textsuperscript{142} In turn, symbolic studies of specific plants and animals within Islamic art even reveal coded meaning within the scene of paradise. For example, the “traditional Middle Eastern motif” of the “Tree of Life” could take the form of a palm tree, while birds perched on the branches of a pomegranate tree could represent deceased souls.\textsuperscript{143} The peacock signaled the importance of avoiding the “foolish pride” of Adam and Eve that had led to their “fall.” Then, the hoopoe represents a metaphysical imagery of an enlightened bird that led other birds to the “truth.”\textsuperscript{144}

Although Baya painted independently of such specifications of paradise, a comparative study of her artwork with symbolic Quranic themes and images reveals intriguing coincidences. For example, a majority of Baya’s gouaches depicts verdant or colorful plants that evoke the rich vegetation of paradise. In Fontaine et poissons (“Fountain and fish”; 1966), the abundant waters, swarming fish, and fruit-bearing trees

\textsuperscript{142} Baker 132.

\textsuperscript{143} The notion of the palm tree as representing the “Tree of Life” comes from analyses of interior decorations of mosques from Medina and Damascus. The pomegranate-and-bird imagery derives its symbolic signification from a study of two Kharraqan tomb towers in Iran, according to editor Robert Hillenbrand’s Images and Meaning in Islamic Art (London: Altajir Trust, 2005) 110, 114.

\textsuperscript{144} Baker 137.
again suggest the divine Garden. Even the hoopoes that Baya incorporates into her painting potentially signify considerable metaphysical meaning in the context of the life and art of Baya.\textsuperscript{145} The two hoopoes in \textit{Huppies, hud-hud} ("Hooopoes, lute-lute"); 1975) metaphorically indicate the function that Baya’s art fulfills vis-à-vis the artist: one bird represents the enlightened unconscious Baya that is leading the other bird—the conscious Baya—to the truth of her identity. In addition, the meaning associated with the markings on the hoopoe expose an eerie coincidence regarding Baya’s past. The coloration and pattern on this bird becomes “a memento of carrying its mother to her grave.”\textsuperscript{146} Considering Baya’s early orphanhood, her depiction of the two hoopoes metaphorically and literally represents two respective mementos in commemoration of her lost parents.

In addition to illustrating paradise and Islamic symbolic imagery, Baya’s pictures re-present creatures and flora from such a fresh perspective that they seem to “define and […] name” them as Adam had done in the Garden of Eden. Recalling the story of Genesis while describing the scenes of Baya’s paintings, Pélégri adds a twist to the narrative. Adam had assumed the responsibility of naming each animal, plant or thing brought to him. Baya takes this a step further by redefining these products of Creation. Pélégri even goes as far as to suggest that Baya “corrects” Divine Creation! Yet he acknowledges the credit that Baya gives to God’s work by the way that she recalls the “signature de Dieu dans la creation de ces creatures” (“signature of God in the creation of these creatures”) in her paintings.\textsuperscript{147} Whether correcting or acclaiming Creation, Baya’s artwork gives the

\textsuperscript{145} Titles of works such as \textit{Femme et paon} (“Woman and peacock”; 1947) and \textit{Huppies, hud-hud} (“Hooopoes, lute-lute”; 1975) indicate the specificity of the birds that Baya paints.

\textsuperscript{146} Baker 137.

\textsuperscript{147} Pélégri 7-8.
viewer the opportunity to quietly wander through different scenes of women who are meandering and dancing in landscapes of paradise or lounging in the comfort of a dwelling. Directly through painting and indirectly through the figures that Baya portrays, she creates a transjective viewpoint that crosses spaces, media, and timeframes, and manifests a liberating “Ka’aba,” “third space,” and home of her new emergent identity as the last subsection of this chapter will now explain.

The “Ka’aba” of Recreation

Through transjective creativity, Baya induces a second birth through her gouaches: “Le rêve d’un peintre: naître comme événement dans la naissance de son art. Seconde naissance, imaginaire; elle met en miroir la première naissance. Elle la complète, la développe comme un tableau ou comme une phrase” (“The dream of a painter: to be born like an event in the birth of his art. A second birth, imaginary; it mirrors the first birth. It completes it, develops it like a painting or like a sentence”). This section will thus show how Baya repaints her new identity within and through the inventive space of art. Moreover, her gouaches suggest a feminine trajectory toward self-recreation. Exercising creative freedom in painting, she re-presents a feminine perspective of her country and of Algerian women. Her art subsequently displays a “woman’s battle” that redeems a new subjectivity for herself and for her fellow female citizens.

148 Khatibi, “Croisement” 22.
Based on Baya’s comment, “[q]uand je peins, je suis heureuse, je suis dans un autre monde, j’oublie tout” (“[w]hen I paint, I am happy, I am in an/other world, I forget everything”), painting seems to offer her a new world in which she can lose herself, yet also a means by which she finds herself.\footnote{Trois femmes 19.} The artist seeks a rebirth of her identity within the creative space of painting. Through the arabesque and narrative features of her works, she expresses a cultural history that she had preserved consciously or subconsciously.\footnote{While some critics believe that Baya had not received cultural formation, this study considers the influence that the artist’s residence in Algeria may have had on her paintings.} Yet how does Baya recall her origins in the very efforts to “forget everything,” especially a past painfully wrought by hardship?\footnote{"Croisement" 23.}

Khatibi’s reference to a “mémoire en devenir” (“memory in the process of becoming”) helps to unravel the paradox of remembering even in the act of forgetting.\footnote{Walter D. Mignolo and Freya Schiwy, “Beyond Dichotomies: Translation/ Transculturation and the Colonial Difference,” Beyond Dichotomies, ed. Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002) 271-72; Linda Alcoff, “Cultural Feminism vs. Poststructuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory,” Feminist Theory in Practice and Process, eds. Jean O’Barr, Micheline R. Molsan, Mary Wyer, and Sarah Westphal (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1989) 21.} Instead of being frozen in a particular form, memories can change over time and later emerge into new forms as they do in Baya’s paintings. Mignolo and Schiwy’s concept of the evolving subjectivity similarly applies to Baya’s situation. Since identity could be both a “state” and “movement,” the self finds definition through an ongoing “process.”\footnote{“La structure” 426.} Like the Derridian notion of “play,” the present inevitably changes through constant substitutions of differences.\footnote{“La structure” 426.} Therefore, as elements of Baya’s past resurface in her pictures, they depict a transformed past. The pleasure that Baya discovers in painting...
moreover indicates her liberation from the tragic events of her childhood due to the “becoming” processes of memory and identity.

As a sequential study of Baya’s gouaches will show, the paintings reveal an identity-in-progress. The content and techniques of her paintings seem to transform with her life experiences. In turn, the recurring motifs of her works also display the thematic and temporal flexibility that she maintains in her paintings. She paints every moment without feeling trapped in any particular frame of life whether in the past, present or future. The optimistic view of identity formation as being emergent frees Baya from a fixed state and thus explains how her paintings can simultaneously illustrate a return to the past and a recreation of a new identity.

While the theories of identity as a process partly elucidate how Baya manages to re- evoke the past through her art, findings concerning art therapy also shed light on the role that the subconscious plays in influencing her art. Experimentation with visual creativity for various health and healing purposes had already existed since the early twentieth century. Art therapy—a form of therapy that combines art and psychology—had more significantly developed since the 1950s. This practice had emerged among new therapies and treatments associated with the psychoanalytical movement as a result of Freud’s theories. His concept of the unconscious made a significant impact in forming psychoanalysts and inspiring artists in the 1920s (e.g. surrealist painters). The increased awareness of the inner self thus plays a central role in art therapy. Therapists

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154 This chapter will show this evolution in Baya’s art shortly.


156 Malchiodi 35.
encourage patients to draw or paint from "within" in order to understand and visually express the "inner experience."\textsuperscript{157} Through this exploration of feelings, perceptions, and the imagination, a "healing power" and "symbolic communication emerge[ ]." The "creative process" of art making offers the afflicted individual a notion of "personal fulfillment," "emotional reparation," and "transformation." At the same time, the end product represents a form of psychotherapy that exposes the artist's "issues, emotions, and conflicts."\textsuperscript{158}

Baya's lifetime relationship with painting illustrates the double function that art can have for an individual who has suffered through a traumatic event or past. As part of the process of Baya's "becoming," painting represents a way for her to contend with the sadness of her orphanhood. She admits that in her childhood, she was "always sad" on account of losing her parents.\textsuperscript{159} When her adoptive mother encourages her to draw and paint, she discovers a creative outlet that provides her with a source of "emotional reparation." As Khanna states: "holding the brushes, it seems, was a form of therapy for [Baya] that allowed her to evade every other difficulty."\textsuperscript{160} Psychoanalyses of bereaved children show that art not only provides a feeling of evasion, but that it also contributes to the rebuilding of a new self. Once the "destructive elements and the depressive features"
of the traumatic experience “are neutralized,” art represents a means by which orphans can produce a “creative product” or a “creatively integrated personality.”

By neutralizing the trauma of loss through painting, Baya “forget[s] everything.” She describes the liberating experience by stating, “[q]uand je peins, je suis heureuse, je suis dans un autre monde, j’oublie tout” (“When I paint, I am happy, I am in an/other world, I forget everything”). Oblivion gives Baya the capacity to deal with the difficult memories of her past. Many of her compositions depict a cheerful tone that conveys the exultation that she discovers in filling her paintings with dreamlike creatures and landscapes. Moreover, as the artist’s own words indicate, her intuition inspires her to conceive her imaginative paintings: “Je le ressens et je le mets sur le papier. Ça me fait plaisir, mais je ne peux pas dire pourquoi ma peinture est comme ceci ou cela” (“I feel it and I put it onto paper. I enjoy that, but I cannot say why my painting is like this or that”).

In addition to helping Baya withstand the post-traumatic stress of her past, her art helps her to rebuild her “creatively integrated personality.” By entering “an/other world” in painting, she discovers a place for self-(re)creation. Thus the creative space of survival also becomes a passage to “personal fulfillment” and “transformation.” As the details of Baya’s first attempts at drawing indicate, the process of self-recreation required a preliminary period of exploration that resisted invention. In the home of her

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162 Trois femmes 19.

163 Eisenstadt et al. 26.

164 Malchiodi 4, 6.
adoptive parent, Baya found an English magazine of children’s art. Initially, she had copied the pictures she saw. Yet she quickly learned that she should produce original artwork by drawing whatever came to her mind.\textsuperscript{165} This transition from imitation to creation reflects a step in the process of Baya’s quest for identity. She had tried to adopt the image of another child as a means to replace the identity she thought she had lost.

Psychoanalytical studies by Eisenstadt et al. on orphaned individuals show that other children displayed reactions similar to Baya’s. One study regarding Jean-Paul Sartre’s childhood reveals a circumstance parallel to that of Baya. Although Sartre had not lost both parents early in life like Baya, he had lost his father. Eisenstadt et al. claim that in response, “Sartre begins to write, to plagiarize, because, lacking a father, he found in what he copied the guide, the model, the guide post that he had always lacked […]”\textsuperscript{166} While the adoptive mother had discouraged Baya’s intentions of reproducing the drawings of other children, the child’s gesture of copying reflects that of Sartre who had sought a guide within the work of others. Baya, like Sartre, began to explore the question of identity by imitating others. When Baya moves beyond the mediocrity of replication, she begins reinventing a new world within which her new self emerges.

As mentioned earlier, Baya’s art manifests an evolution due to continuous “substitutions of differences.”\textsuperscript{167} She reveals her personal experiences through the gradual modifications that she makes in her art. At each stage of life—child, adolescent, adult, and widow—Baya thus incorporates images and techniques that correspond to the

\textsuperscript{165} *Trois femmes* 19. Although Baya does not specify whether it was her grandmother or Marguerite who had discouraged her from copying art, the reference to an English magazine of children’s art suggests the latter adoptive mother.

\textsuperscript{166} 61.

\textsuperscript{167} Derrida, “La structure” 426.
becoming process of the recreation of her identity. Her art manifests a gradual change in personality through a refinement of technique. At Baya’s first exposition in André Maeght’s gallery in Paris, her paintings predominantly featured women, children, fantastical birds and animals, butterflies, fish, flowers, trees, and other vegetation. The 1947 gouaches *Trois femmes et papillons* (”Three women and butterflies”) and *Femme et oiseau bleu* (”Woman and blue bird”), for example, demonstrate the recurring images of women, birds, and vegetation. Stylistically, Baya’s brushstrokes appear spontaneous giving her paintings a raw, unfinished appearance, while the overall mood is festive, joyous, and magical. Thematically, the pictures reflect Baya’s adolescent imagination. The paintings often portray elegantly dressed women roaming the outdoors, lounging in colorful interiors, or playing with birds and butterflies.

Then, just as Baya underwent the transition from adolescent to adult, a break in her artwork from 1953-63 respectively marks that turning point of her life. Many critics believe that her marriage accounted for her temporary absence from the art world. When she turned twenty-one, her adoptive family decided that they had fulfilled their role and placed her under the care of tutor-Muslim judge Chanderli and professor Ould Rouis who eventually arranged a traditional marriage for her. She wedded musician El Hadj Mahfoud Mahieddine (born in 1903) in 1953 as his second wife, abandoned her art, and fulfilled the duties of raising a family of six children, according to Ali Silem.\(^{168}\)

Although Baya’s responsibilities as a new mother appropriately explain the interruption in her art from 1953-1963, they should not overshadow the political circumstance of her country at that time. Yet critics speak little of the Algerian War that

had overlapped with Baya’s break from art. Pointing out the obvious coincidence, Khanna questions the silence on the matter. At the same time, the lack of commentary reveals the profound effect of the war on both the artist and her public. Could speaking out about the issue have been taboo? Born within an Arab-Kabyle-Berber family, raised by both an Algerian grandmother and a French mother, Baya had ties to different sides of rivaling parties making her case a difficult one to understand fully or explain. Moreover, Baya’s transnational participation—in Algeria and France—in the art world reinforced her complicated circumstance. She had her first gallery showing in Paris with the help of Aimé Maeght. Shortly after, she visited Vallauris, France in order to study Madoura pottery. Yet she later married into a Muslim family in Blida, Algeria and lived a life of “tradition,” according to Djebar. Like many Algerians and Algerian-born individuals, Baya undoubtedly felt divided by the War. Other conjectures about the pause of Baya’s painting include her fear of the possible political implications that her artwork could trigger despite her intentions to paint a-politically. For Baya, painting represented a means of escaping reality rather than a weapon of political expression for the War. Her decision to stop painting may therefore also reveal an intentional choice to dissociate herself from surrealist contemporaries like Breton who considered the function of art to be “overtly political.” In connection with the available explanations for Baya’s withdrawal from painting, the most logical reason would be the impracticality of pursuing art in the midst of the dangers, chaos, and violence of a war-torn nation.

169 261.

170 Trois femmes 17.

171 Khanna 262-63.
With speculations set aside, Baya’s biography indicates that she returns to painting in 1963 after spending a decade fulfilling her role as a wife and mother. Shortly after the Algerian Independence in 1962, Jean de Maisonseuil pulls together a show of Baya’s earlier works at the Musée National de Beaux-Arts of Algiers. As the newly appointed curator of the museum,\(^{172}\) Maisonseuil—a “peintre-témoin des prisons d’hier et des combats fraternels” (“witness-painter of prisons of yesterday and of fraternal combats”)\(^{173}\) in the words of Djebar—offers Baya encouragement and the opportunity not only to return into public view but also to recommence her art.

Despite the family obligations and the devastating War that had temporarily stopped Baya’s work, her “second period of [ ] work” manifests a “resuscitated and twirling childhood.”\(^{174}\) The second series of Baya’s paintings reflects a resurrected past rather than merely a depiction of the artist’s post-marriage adulthood years according to Djebar. With the same energy of her youth, she repaints her women, flora, and fauna, and reveals traces of her liberated and imaginative sixteen-year-old spirit. The women express the same mysterious gaze and smile that had intrigued her public in 1947. Yet sophistication highlights Baya’s style giving her women more poise. Just as Baya’s lifestyle had evolved from that of an adolescent to the role of wife and mother, her pictures progressed into distinguished versions of her previous artwork.

A closer examination of Baya’s later paintings shows the thematic adaptations that she makes. For example, the figures, plants, and animals of her 1960s works appear more refined. Baya’s illustrations appear more controlled such that the black outlines of

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\(^{172}\) Baya: “L’orient” 16.

\(^{173}\) Trois femmes 18.

\(^{174}\) Trois femmes 17-18.
the women’s silhouettes and birds give distinction to her pictures. The shapes and colors in her paintings similarly reflect exactitude, uniformity, and density that suggest a sense of confidence. The contours of the trees, birds, fish, and the other imaginary creatures manifest greater definition and increased autonomy. The rawness and spontaneity with which Baya had painted during her youth seemed to have matured into more composed versions. Although Baya’s later paintings move away from the erratic and almost unfinished nature of her earlier works, the same dynamic and imaginative energy remains. If Baya of 1947 was a young woman still learning to master her brushstrokes and to define herself, then Baya of post-1963 became a woman who had attained a level of expertise and maturity in her art as well as in her life experiences.

In addition to indicating refined techniques, Baya’s later pictures include new objects such as musical instruments, the Quran, and women partaking in activities that reflect their everyday existence. The added articles and scenes speak of the changes that took place in the painter’s lifestyle. Married into a traditional Muslim home at the age of twenty-two as a second wife, she lived in the “demeures de femmes.” This new life with her husband marks the beginning of her wifehood and motherhood. Twenty-eight years Baya’s senior according to Silem’s records in Baya: Peintre du bonheur, El Hadj Mahfoud Mahieddine was a “maître de musique classique arabe dite ‘andalouse’” (“master of Classic Arab ‘Andalouse’ music”). Thus Baya’s post-1963 paintings such as Meïda à la lanterne (“Meïda with lantern”; 1966) and in Dame au Qoran (“Woman with Quran”; 1967) point to her role as a wife to a musician in a Muslim home. Baya

175 This expression can be translated either as “women’s dwelling” or “wives’ dwelling” given that Baya had married El Hadj Mahfoud Mahieddine as a second wife. Trois femmes 17.

176 Trois femmes 17.
recalls that upon arriving in the home of her husband, “il y avait des instruments de musique partout [. . .] De vivre au milieu de tous ces instruments m’a influencée” (“there were musical instruments everywhere [. . .] It influenced me to live amidst all of these instruments”).

Thus the lutes, vases, and pages of an opened Quran scattered throughout her post-1963 works reflect the objects that had defined the years she spent with her husband. Baya’s marriage to the talented musical artist also meant her “re-anchorage” into a “protected” “ancestral role” from Djebar’s perspective as an Algerian woman. During the first decade as a wife (1953-63), Baya finds her hands full with six children and with “so many domestic chores.” Seeing this interim period as “tunnel-years,” Djebar sympathizes with the hardships of Baya’s many domestic duties. An unnamed “second mother”—the first wife perhaps—had also offered Baya the “tenderness” and “care of an elder sister.”

When Baya portrays women partaking in activities of carrying vases and tending plants, she therefore paints self-portraits of her life as a mother caring for the home. The female figures appear to be more occupied with domestic tasks, with the Quran or with sisterly companionship rather than simply with dancing among butterflies and befriending feathered friends.

Whether transporting vases or playing with animals, the women who are posed inside ornate and well-furnished dwellings, next to vegetation, and in the company of other creatures, convey an image of liberation. Yet they also reveal the influence of a culturally specific detail that corresponds to Baya’s life in Algeria. The prominence of female figures in her works emphasizes the perpetual centrality of women in her personal

177 Baya: Avril 13.

178 Trois femmes 17-18.
life. Among the influential individuals of the artist’s life—her biological parents, grandmother, adoptive French mother, and husband—the majority is female. While the reason for the dominant presence of women in Baya’s pictures seems evident, the absence of men raises questions. Although Baya lives much of her earlier life without a dominant father figure, sources indicate that she had many encounters and friendships with male figures. Through Marguerite’s two marriages—first with Mac Ewen (an Englishman) and later with Baya’s tutor—a Muslim judge, Mohamed Benhoura—Baya encounters men who would represent paternal substitutes. Then, in Baya’s exposure to the art world, she meets Aimé Maeght, André Breton, Jean de Maisonseuil, Pablo Picasso, and Jean Sénac. Finally, her own marriage to the Algerian musician El Hadj Mahfoud Mahieddine in 1953 indicates the constant presence of a man in her personal life.

Whether Baya’s inclination to exclude male figures from her pictures comes from personal, religious, or cultural factors, it nevertheless highlights the overriding importance that women had made in her life both as a child and as an adult. It also reflects the lifestyle with which she had been familiar as a woman in Algeria.\(^{180}\)

Nevertheless, given her interactions with men throughout her upbringing, the male-less aspect of her art still fails to have a clear reason. Had Baya been uncomfortable with

\(^{179}\) Sénac 224.

\(^{180}\) Women generally remained in separate quarters from the men and could not freely wander in public, as Juliette Mincès states in *La femme voilée: L’islam au féminin*. Enclosure, invisibility and submission define the life of a Muslim woman in Algeria. Inside the home, women remain hidden from men behind “moucharabieh” while outside—to go to the market or to go to the public baths—they wear their veils. In short, women should not attract attention or reveal their presence (Mincès 67). Depending on the location of residence, these restrictive regulations vary. For example, in the city as opposed to the villages, women could find themselves even more constrained. If a woman, originally coming from rural settings, moves into the city with her husband, she would not be allowed to see friends, family or participate in various ceremonies. Women live to fulfill the traditional function of being sex objects, productive mothers, and active perpetuators of identical roles (Mincès 76). If Baya had lived in a comparable lifestyle as a woman, this would explain why she based her compositions on the female subjects whom were available to her in the private sphere.
portraying men in her artwork? Did Baya simply prefer to paint women? Or did she feel the need to conform to the Algerian cultural practice in which the female gaze remained averted to that of the male?

Although no definite explanation exists, certain details in Baya’s later paintings suggest the impact that her husband’s presence may have had on her art during her married life. The gazes and postures of the women of Baya’s post-1963 paintings in particular signal the influence of her spouse. While the expressions and positions of women from her 1947 work appear more defiant and carefree, those of the female figures in her post-marriage paintings appear more composed while also avoiding direct eye contact with the viewer. Does Baya take care to avert the eyes of her subjects in accordance with the practices expected within a traditional Muslim family? The modifications visible in Baya’s later gouaches thus invite speculation on this detail of her later works.

Just as the external influences on Baya’s life—her marriage and motherhood—visibly impact her paintings, internal factors also play a role in shaping her artwork. While Baya endures the grief of her orphanhood on account of her painting, her pictures still reveal psychological repercussions of the past. As the investigations of art therapy indicate, individuals can express through art what they fail to articulate in words. Accordingly, “symbolic communication” takes place within Baya’s pictures. In the form of signs and motifs, she seems to unconsciously present the repercussions of the trauma of her childhood years. Psychotherapy—a reading of the “issues, emotions, and conflicts” of the artist-patient’s past—of particular aspects of Baya’s works reveals the
continued effects of incidents from the past.\textsuperscript{181} For example, Maubert identifies a “hatred of emptiness” within Baya’s paintings.\textsuperscript{182} Baya seemed to eliminate as much dead space as possible leaving very little unpainted surface. What viewers might perceive to be a decorative approach to painting could display the artist’s unconscious effort to fill a figurative void concerning her life. The most obvious gap in Baya’s youth is the absence of her parents. Yet in the process, she psychologically restores an image of abundance that redeems the lack of her past.

Baya also reacts to the notion of emptiness by depicting the maternal figure and by creating an image of intimacy among women and nature. For example, she portrays the “tender squeezing” of maternal figures in several 1947 paintings including \textit{Personnage et oiseau rouge} ("Personage and red bird") and \textit{Femme et oiseau bleu} ("Woman and blue bird"). Despite the simple titles of the two compositions, each portrays a parent, an infant, and a feathered creature. Although the relationship between the two individuals of these works cannot be accurately determined, the position of the figures insinuates a mother-child portrait. Moreover, the woman seated behind the child tightly cuddles the youth in a manner that conveys a protective and loving gesture: she attempts to prevent any separation between herself and the infant. In the context of Baya’s life, this type of close-knit and inseparable bond between a mother and daughter represents the type of relationship that Baya had desired to have with her biological mother whom she had lost as a child. She even admits that she had been “influencée par le fait qu'[elle] ne l’a[ ] pas très bien connue, qu'[elle] a[ ] été imprégnée de son absence”

\textsuperscript{181} Malchiodi 6.

\textsuperscript{182} 8.
("influenced by the fact that she had not known her very well, the she had been permeated by her absence").\textsuperscript{183} In fact, in the 1947 paintings entitled \textit{Rêve de la Mère I} and \textit{II} ("Dream of the Mother I" and "II"), this subconscious detail becomes a reality as the similar works depict the daughter encountering the elegant and miraculous presence of her beautiful mother. In turn, the "complicité et mariage des végétaux, des bêtes et des humains" ("complicity and marriage of vegetation, animals, and humans") imply the main theme of her works: "love."\textsuperscript{184} The mood of constant companionship among the women, plants, and creatures dispels the fear of loneliness and loss. Baya thus reinvents a world that compensates for the losses of the past and by which she consequently achieves her "second birth." With unfailing determination and a gifted imagination, she creates a utopian space within which her new identity emerges.

On the one hand, the rebirth that Baya experiences through painting illustrates the ultimate achievement of an artist. On the other, Baya’s accomplishment reflects another reality that becomes gender and culture specific. She re-presents a "North African woman’s" interpretation of Algerian women and landscapes.\textsuperscript{185} Moreover, her life and her artwork illustrate an Algerian woman’s trajectory to rebuilding a new self. On her journey, three significant forces motivate her: her maternal encouragement of Marguerite, her creativity, and her perseverance.

As a study of the events and accomplishments Baya’s life reveals, maternal encouragement, creativity, and perseverance prove to be strongly interrelated. She had
touched her first brushes following substantial support she had received from her adoptive French mother, Marguerite Caminat Benhoura. When Hélène Cixous comments on how woman “maintains the productive force of the other, in particular of the other woman,” she echoes the role that Marguerite had played for Baya.186 As an artist, Marguerite introduced Baya directly to the world of painting. Then, by offering space, art supplies, and words of support, she gave Baya the opportunity to maintain her productive force. Finally, with her network of acquaintances in Paris, she projected Baya’s name to the public both nationally and internationally. By thus encouraging and supporting Baya in her art, this adoptive parent helped her to discover and nurture her creativity.

Embracing the opportunities that Marguerite extends, Baya creatively invents her own techniques and themes of painting. Each of her works represents not only a unique cosmos free of the constraints of convention, but also the free spirit of Baya herself: she creates art indiscriminate of predesignated systems. In order to describe Baya’s innovative style, Pélégrí perceives her inspiration as similar to that of a child who had never been permitted to touch the shapes and colors of the world. She consequently learns to reinvent them for herself.187 In fact, Baya had discovered that she should not copy others. Instead, she learns to paint whatever came to her mind.188 Accordingly, she stops imitating the shapes and colors that she perceives and instead recreates them in her

186 “Le rire” 44.
187 10.
188 Trois femmes 19.
mind. With this “winged liberty” that helps her to escape from the confinements of reality, she transforms her world into an imaginary paradise.  

Given how Baya introduces newness into art, she gives Maubert the impression of having invented painting. Similarly, she reminds Pélégri of a child who innocently reinvented the “birth of things.” Thus straying from constraints of reality, this Algerian woman paints with a “nouveauté, [une] innocence originelle – comme si Baya, pour nous rafraîchir l’œil et la mémoire, tirait ce rideau de conventions et d’images toutes faites qui nous cache ces réalités, autrefois entrevues, mais peu à peu voilés, que nous goûtons, enfant, quand nous réinventions la naissance des choses” (“newness, [an] original innocence – as if Baya, to refresh the eye and memory, pulled [away] this curtain of conventions and pre-constructed images that hid these realities from us, [realities] formerly glimpsed, but veiled little by little, that we used to taste, as a child, when we used to reinvent the birth of things”), as Pélégri explains. Baya seems to pull aside the curtain of convention and paint with innocence and freshness. Thus, the women, trees, flowers, and curious creatures allude to an “original innocence,” a lost memory of humanity.

Pélégri and Maubert recognize Baya’s extraordinary ability to introduce new meaning to painting. The source of her creativity lies in her freedom to reinvent reality. To explain this, Derrida states that the inspiring experience of beauty can only exist with the liberty to imagine. Given that beauty in turn could stimulate spontaneous creativity, a

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189 Khatibi, *L’art contemporain* 81.

190 9.

191 6.

192 6.
liberated imagination completes and perpetuates the circle. Continuity thus exists between beauty and imagination. In Baya’s case, she had enjoyed a nurturing setting under Marguerite that allowed her to dream and that consequently resulted in her “productive imagination.”  

Baya’s innovation also results from her deliberate dissociation from convention. Rather than public opinion, Baya’s intuition acted as her instructor. She recreated herself, by and for herself. “Chaque peintre arabe est seul[e] devant son œuvre, là commence son autonomie, sa chance” (“Each Arab painter is alone before her work, that is where her autonomy begins, her opportunity”) as Khatibi claims. His optimistic words illustrate how Baya’s art brought her both opportunity and independence. She found her place in painting, set apart in her singularity.

Of the multiple ways by which Baya demonstrates her creativity, her representation of the Algerian woman proves to be the most outstanding contribution to her country as a female artist. In a society where women must veil themselves physically and vocally, they would subsequently shroud their femininity. Orientalist painters who attempted to capture the concealed setting of Algerian women often portrayed confined or eroticized figures. For example, the work Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement (Femmes d’Alger-ED) by Eugène Delacroix reveals a significantly realistic representation of an ornately decorated room that four women occupy. In Assia Djebar’s

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193 Derrida, La vérité 116.
194 “Croisement” 25.
195 This represents not only woman’s experience but also that of immigrant children, ex-patriots, individuals of multi-national or multi-ethnic background.
196 Woman must not speak out in the presence of man because her speech would transgress against the silence she must maintain (Allami 219).
identically titled book of short stories, *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*, the author comments on the domestic scene of this canvas as representing a constraining enclosure. The depicted feminine figures appear as “[p]risonnières résignées d’un lieu clos [. . .]” (“resigned prisoners of an enclosed place [. . .]”). The windowless walls, hanging tapestries, and deep shadows produce an ambience of containment. Even the faint lighting that falls upon the room seems like the “lumière de serre ou d’aquarium” (“light of a greenhouse or an aquarium”) and doubly emphasizes the sense of enclosure. Together, these details insinuate that these resigned “prisoners” sit in their confinement, “waiting.” Pitying these women who seem to be drowned by the encumbering surroundings of their imprisonment, Djebbar sees them as entities who exist “absentes à elles-mêmes, à leur corps, à leur sensualité, à leur bonheur” (“absent to themselves, to their bodies, to their sensuality, [and] to their happiness”).

The repressed female sexuality visible in Delacroix’s work indicates a social practice of refusing to acknowledge the existence of two sexes, in the opinion of Noria Allami. Allami offers elucidating knowledge on the condition of such women that explains the uniqueness of Baya. In the psychoanalysis of an Algerian woman—Mme D.—who lived in a self-imposed consciousness of imprisonment, Allami identifies the problem in the society’s attitude toward creativity. All innovation represents “bidâa”

197 Translations of quotations of Djebbar’s *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement* now and hereinafter are mine.

198 Djebbar 148.

199 Djebbar 150.


201 This woman, whom Allami anonymously names Mme D, repeatedly claims that she is not free on the inside: “Je ne suis pas libre intérieurement” (“I am not free internally”; my translation). She suffers from a
or a serious lack of customs and tradition. Yet this lack of creative outlet leads to a smothered spirit or a psychological enclosure. Therefore, women who learn to enter into a “place of illusion,” which Allami parallels with the “Ka’aba,” manage to recover and enjoy the pleasure of existing.\textsuperscript{202} This resting state of illusion moreover allows women to acknowledge their femininity, no longer constrained by the self-effacing veil of bidaâ.

In contrast to Allami’s Madame D. or the women sitting in Delacroix’s confining interior setting, Baya had enjoyed creative freedom. Orphaned at an early age and raised by a Frenchwoman, she found herself disconnected from the constraints of “bidaâ.” The respect of customs and traditions thus no longer remained an obstacle to her innovation. In turn, art represents her “Ka’aba.” When she claims to enter “an/other world” in painting, she alludes to the place of illusion and rest where she can exist as Baya. Her pictures reveal liberation from constraints, enclosure, self-effacement, and genderlessness. While exercising her creativity, she removes the veil of invisibility by portraying both the autonomy and femininity of the women in her pictures.

A juxtaposition of Baya’s pictures next to Delacroix’s \textit{Femmes d’Alger-ED} indicates a striking contrast. Most of Baya’s paintings depict women outside among vegetation and butterflies. The women generally express a carefree, joyful attitude as they carry on with their respective activities.\textsuperscript{203} In \textit{Trois femmes et papillons} (“Three

\textsuperscript{202} “Ka-aba”: the place in which the spirit of Wali Salih dwells and also offers Muslim pilgrims a place to rest (Allami 202).

\textsuperscript{203} In some 1947 paintings such as \textit{Femme robe jaune cheveux bleus}, \textit{Femmes attablées}, and \textit{Femme au chapeau à palmes}, the arched eyebrows or smug lips can also be read as representing anger or disappointment. Yet Baya’s own affirmation of the lack of sadness her paintings confirms the positive atmosphere and expressions that she had intended (\textit{Trois femmes} 19).
women and butterflies”), they stroll in elaborate attire that echoes the beauty of the flowers and pastel-colored butterflies accompanying them. Their eyes convey a happiness that results from a life of liberation: “L’œil unique de [s] femmes libérées sourit au ciel d’oiseaux, à la guitare, au monde repeuplé [du cœur de Baya]” (“The unique eye of the liberated women smiles at the sky of birds, at the guitar, at the repopulated world [of Baya’s heart]”). Likewise, Baya finds joy in the autonomy that she discovers in painting. This creative outlet offers her a freedom that would otherwise have remained non-existent for women in her situation. Each gouache reveals the exhilaration of liberty that Baya and her painted subjects enjoy, roaming in another world. Djebbar thus identifies a culturally and circumstantially specific contentment within the expressions of Baya’s women.

The atmosphere of liberation even extends into Baya’s pictures of interiors. Unlike the figures in Delacroix’s Femmes d’Alger-ED, Baya’s seated or lounging women communicate an active or autonomous presence. For example, the women in the 1947 paintings Deux femmes allongées (“Two reclined women”), Femme aux trois tapis (“Woman with three rugs”), and Femme couchée (“Reclined woman”) direct their smiles and comfortable gazes at the viewer creating a mood of confidence and ease. Moreover, the sense of harmony that Baya creates through the repetition of color, forms, and decoration, reinforces the sentiment of peace rather than reluctant confinement.

When compared to Matisse’s paintings, Baya’s artwork appears equally dynamic and imaginative as Pélégri suggests. The works of both artists use bold colors and simplified forms that give a sense of vitality to the women and their surroundings.

204 Trois femmes 18.

Unlike Matisse however, Baya paints women free of eroticism. While paintings such as Matisse’s *L’odalisque à la culotte rouge* tend to depict a sensual pose of a half-nude female subject, Baya’s gouaches portray women in a way that underlines an ambiance of sisterhood or motherhood. Moreover, she clothes her women in bright intricately decorated dresses and accessories that reveal a non-erotic yet attractive image of femininity. Ornate headdresses and coiffures, occasional earrings, necklaces, and baskets complement the carefully decorated outfits. This gendered difference in perspective between Matisse and Baya thus indicates another important way by which the latter brings innovation and correction to Orientalist paintings of Algerian women.

Recognizing the unique perspective of Baya’s artwork, Pélégri claims that the artist offers her public “une autre image des êtres, de la nature—de la femme. /Une autre image de nous-mêmes et de l’Autre” (“an/other image of beings, of nature—of woman. /An/other image of ourselves and of the Other”).²⁰⁶ Pélégri’s description acknowledges not only the alternative outlook that Baya offers, but also the feminine gaze that she displays within her compositions. Breton compares her ingenuity to a mother figure who “gives birth to dreams and gods.” Similarly, Assia Djebar recognizes a birth of “North African feminine creativity” within the artist. For Djebar, a journey into the paintings of Baya resembles crossing through a “feminine version of the Algerian desert.”²⁰⁷ Through her creativity, she turns life into woman and woman into art as Cixous and Clément had proposed: she perceives and transforms Algeria into a feminine creation.

²⁰⁶ Pélégri 12.

²⁰⁷ *Trois femmes* 16-17.
The portrayal of women in Baya's gouaches moreover symbolically breaks certain gender dichotomies. Concerning the notion of femininity as being associated with negativity, Baya's paintings seem to play with this concept visually.\textsuperscript{208} Although Algerian Muslim women were culturally obligated to remain veiled, Baya paints her subjects both as visible and invisible by occupying positive and negative spaces. Women predominate in Baya's gouaches yet a hint of ambiguity remains between the background and the figures. With a lack of distinctive boundaries, some of the subjects and their surroundings seem to bleed together. This produces an effect that gives the women an image of being both foreground and background. Similarly, when painting the faces of her women, Baya carefully includes the eyes, eyebrows, lips, and nose yet often leaves the rest of the face unpainted. Again, the viewer has the impression that the women blend into the colorless background. In this way, Baya's art seems to make a visual metaphoric comment about women who needed to remain hidden in the negative spaces of society.

Connected to the idea of "parergon," the women whom Baya paints seem to occupy a position that surrounds and is surrounded. Although unintentional, this form of representation depicts a revolutionary statement for Algerian women. Just as the background and figures become one, the condition of woman's femininity as negativity and her redeemed positive subjectivity unite. On the one hand, this unification reveals a transitional state of neutrality resulting from the interaction of negative and positive spaces. This alludes to women who have suffered a position of invisibility or absence: they must first dispel their former identity of lack and arrive at ground zero before they

\textsuperscript{208} Cixous and Irigaray identify the association of femininity with negativity in phallocentric gender dichotomies in their respective texts \textit{La jeune née} and \textit{Speculum de l'autre femme}. 
can start rebuilding a new positive presence. Then, just as the women in Baya’s paintings occupy the foreground, the women of her nation can emerge as visible subjects. Coincidentally and appropriately, Baya becomes an increasingly visible female figure in Algeria through her art. On the other hand, the “parergon” imagery also signals how Baya’s art can represent a step toward transcending the erroneous boundaries of gender. Her representation of feminine subjects in this intermediate state reflects an obliteration of the definitions of negativity, neutrality, or positivity all together: an ultimate escape of conventional constraints.

As this chapter explained earlier, Baya’s “emancipation” from tradition results from her ability to depict figurative representation while still incorporating certain features of abstraction typical of Islamic art. She consequently parallels in painting what Cixous performs in writing: “voler” (“to steal/to fly”) on two levels. Baya “steals” techniques established by ancient Islamic and arabesque artists, combining them with classical Occidental realism in order to “fly” with her own innovation. Moreover, she repaints Algerian women from a non-erotic feminine perspective. And by playing with the positive and negative spaces of her paintings, she contests the corresponding gender dichotomies. Baya demonstrates what Cixous foresaw to be the capacity of woman. Through creativity and her productive force, she is changing History. Her art surpasses “masculine imagination” of Orientalist painters like Delacroix and Matisse.²⁰⁹ Baya thus destabilizes the order of the preceding conventional art world on several levels and introduces a new vision that portrays her innovation.

²⁰⁹ "Le rire" 45.
While liberated creativity becomes the key to Baya’s production of original artwork that transcends the History of art, perseverance becomes the force that carries the artist’s rebirth to term. Djebar perceives a “frail and strong” woman behind the scenes of Baya’s gouaches. The lively and imaginative paintings suggest frailness due to the spontaneity and free-spirited inspiration that they depict. At the same time, Baya’s strength in painting sustains her through the vicissitudes of her life: her orphanhood, her motherhood of bearing and raising six children, and eight ruthless years of war. Likewise, as an elderly woman, she survives the death of her husband on account of her art. When she loses her spouse in 1979,210 she admits to thinking, “I thought I might die!” Yet with the strength that she regains in the creative force of painting, and for the sake of her children and many friends, she surmounts her grief.211

The perseverance that Baya maintains through her losses also appears in the unyielding integrity with which she paints. She fights against conformism by not altering her artwork for the sake of pleasing the public. The evolution visible in Baya’s post-marriage work in comparison to her pre-marriage art mostly pertains to techniques of refinement: “[. . .] dans le fond, ça change. Si l’on regarde mes premières peintures, on peut s’en rendre compte au niveau des formes et des couleurs” (“[. . .] in effect, it changes. If one looks at my first paintings, one notices this [change] at the level of form and colors”). The changes that do occur—the inclusion of lutes and Quranic scriptures, the averted gazes and domestic activities of the women—indicate Baya’s new lifestyle as a spouse in a Muslim home. Yet in the midst of these slight alterations, she preserves the

210 Baya: Peintre.
211 Trois femmes 18.
same subject matter of women, flora, and fauna. When asked "Why always the same thing?" she explains, "I find that if I change my paintings, they will no longer be mine." If she had conformed to what others had preferred, the distinctive work that her name signifies would have disappeared. She never compromises her originality to the day of her passing on 9 November 1998.

With outstanding determination to persevere both in art and in life, Baya demonstrates the impressive achievement of reaching national and international recognition—apparently a "shock" even to her: "C'était pour moi, d'une certaine manière, un choc. Connaître tout ce monde, voir tant de choses. Je n'étais pas habituée." ("It was for me, in a certain way, a shock. To know all these people, see so many things. I was not used to it."). This success speaks a thousand fold more, again, given that Baya achieved it as a woman. Her inventiveness in art marks the beginning of a new period "d’émancipation et de concorde, en rupture radicale avec le précédent" ("of emancipation and harmony, with a radical break from the former"). She diverges from preceding artistic movements or styles in order to develop her own.

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212 *Trois femmes* 19.

213 The date of Baya’s death has also been recorded as 11 November 1998, yet the majority of publications suggest the former date. Possibly linked to Baya’s unspecified life-long illness, she was admitted into a hospital in Bôdja where she underwent surgery for peritonitis. Yet she passed away two days after the operation (Baya: Peintre).

214 *Trois femmes* 19.

215 Varying conditions exist for women in Algeria. In some cases, a daughter might enjoy a full education and the freedom to pursue her profession of interest. An Algerian writer and feminist, Djebar represents an archetypal example. However, in many cases, women live a lifestyle that offers them much less liberty as Minces indicates. See note 134.

216 Breton 13.
By demonstrating a resolute and original approach to painting, Baya leaves her unique signature. Moreover, the lasting name that she establishes—ironically her first name, Baya—literally underlines her autonomy given her sociocultural circumstance. Born Fatma Haddad yet orphaned at the age of five, she had been virtually anonymous. And without a father, brother or husband to anchor her to a particular lineage, Baya would have remained nameless. Yet she later receives the pseudonym, Baya.\textsuperscript{217} The conferral of the new name takes on a symbolic significance by foreshadowing the new identity that Baya builds for and by herself through painting. Even when she receives the name Mahieddine upon marrying, she continues to go by Baya. She independently reaches a level of international recognition that moreover surpasses the visibility of her spouse.

Baya thus represents one among very few Algerian women whom the public knows by her first name. Regardless of the family from which she had originated, she proves herself through her creative accomplishments. While Maeght and Maisonseuil had catalyzed her fame by arranging gallery expositions internationally, her talent secures her success. Even after the Algerian War, she had shown her work both nationally and internationally to the point where collections in France, Cuba, and Japan now hold and display her paintings.

Although Baya's story starts simply, it ends up transcending multiple boundaries and obstacles of convention. Already considered socially inferior to her male counterpart as daughter, wife or mother, she would have been completely marginalized as an

\textsuperscript{217} Khanna 258.
orphan. Yet Baya attains an extraordinary level of visibility on account of her original creativity. Baya thus models a fight for her feminine contemporaries—a “woman’s battle” as Djebbar states—to overcome the monotonies of daily life and build a name and an identity for themselves. Baya represents a heroine for Algerian women by transcending the social boundaries of a patriarchal cultural tradition that tended to keep women invisible. She accomplishes in her artwork what Cixous encourages women to achieve through writing. The more that woman creates, whether through writing or through art, “plus la femme s’affirme, se découvre, et s’invente” (“[the] more the woman in you is affirmed, discovered, invented”). Baya demonstrates precisely that: she affirms her existence, discovers herself, and invents a new enduring identity in art.

In Baya’s biography, the details of her past explain her disconnection from her heritage. Yet amidst the transitions of being passed into the hands of multiple surrogate mothers, she discovers a means to redeem her tragic childhood. What seem to be the weaknesses of Baya’s past (her orphanhood and multiple adoptive parents) later become the strengths that free her from the constraints of convention. With Marguerite’s encouragement, Baya had taken up art and began reinventing an ornate world of female figures, peacocks, hoopees, and interlacing vegetation. Evoking North African folklore for some critics and ornamental calligraphic works of Islamic art for others, her pictures appear to preserve remnants of her ethnocultural origins. At the same time, her semi-

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218 Minces 25, 33.
219 Trois femmes 18.
220 Cixous et al, La venue 60; Cixous, “Coming” 55.
abstract paintings remind her public of European modernist works of artists like Matisse. Baya thus represents a mystery to those who seek to situate her within a specific cultural art tradition.

Yet art historians will begin to unravel the enigma when they understand the artist’s transjective vision. In addition to crossing cultural borders, Baya’s pictures mix images of the conscious realm with those of the subconscious. Likewise, by insinuating writing within her paintings and by transcending temporal boundaries, she suggests the notion of plurality. Her pictures demonstrate a site of convergence that resembles a “passe-partout” region. In Baya’s borderland art, her singularity emerges through her reinvention of reality and ultimately through the recreation of her multidimensional identity.

While the journey to rebirth in art represents a phenomenon that both men and women experience, this chapter sought to show how a gendered reading of Baya’s life and art illustrates a particularly feminine trajectory. As an orphaned girl in a patriarchal society, her life starts below ground zero: homeless, anonymous, and hopeless. The subsequent events of her life thus reflect an extraordinary story for an Algerian woman in her given sociocultural circumstance. Marguerite’s involvement in Baya’s childhood launches her path to redemption. The benefactor gives the orphan a new beginning in art. With freedom to imagine, Baya in turn demonstrates a unique creative ability by reinventing a new approach to painting. Moreover, the therapeutic and strengthening qualities of art provide her with the strength to withstand the bereavement of losing her
parents and her spouse. Thus with the driving forces of maternal encouragement, creativity, and perseverance, Baya reaches her “right birth.”

Baya’s second birth in art represents an accomplishment that not only affects her identity, but also that of Algerian women. Although she gives no indication of having political motives, her pictures project a new image of femininity. She contests the Orientalist depictions of women of her nation. Instead of imitating the confining environment of Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Alger*—ED, she re-presents her female subjects in scenes that reflect a spirit of emancipation. In turn, she replaces the eroticized figures of Matisse’s *Odalisques* with women who manifest their beauty through their silhouettes of elegance and liberation. Baya thus becomes a heroic figure in the eyes of Djebar. The artist’s life story and works model a new autonomous existence for women in Algeria.

While this chapter aimed to uncover the contributions that Baya had made as an artist and female citizen of Algeria, her paintings raise other unaddressed issues in the twenty-first century. First, as the world heads toward a transnational future under the influence of a global economy, how will the public read Baya’s paintings? Preliminary speculations reveal how economic factors may explain the success of this Algerian artist. Marguerite managed to fuel Baya’s accomplishments through the means of effective networking within the art world. Moreover, the transnational quality of Baya’s artwork attracted the public in Algeria, France, Cuba, and Japan. The themes of plurality that she conveyed through her gouaches thus may explain her popularity. Other factors—particularly linked to her sociocultural circumstance—most likely played a significant role in increasing her marketability: the story of her orphanhood and as a woman in a patriarchal nation. From these interpretations, Baya could represent a hidden pearl that

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221 Cixous et al. *La venue* 34; Cixous, “*Coming*” 28.
investors happened to discover, brandish, and market appropriately. Yet even amidst the projection of hypotheses and questions for future studies, critics need to continue heeding Khanna’s warning. Instead of framing Baya’s accomplishments within the prevalent mindsets, they need to preserve the singularity of the artist.

Next, a thorough psychoanalytical study that combines art therapy with other psychological interpretations of art expression could provide further insight in Baya’s paintings. Although Baya’s artwork suggests euphoria, (how) do the decorative features, simplified shapes, and depiction of women communicate bereavement and the fear of abandonment? When do Baya’s pictures illustrate the masking, suppression or compensation of past trauma? While these investigations may shed more light on the influence and significance of the subconscious on Baya’s works, the analyses must again avoid overly generalized interpretations that may limit the originality of the artwork. Nonetheless, these steps of extended research will further expose Baya’s otherwise unexplored endeavors and remarkable accomplishments.
-- Chapter Two --

Hélène Cixous
J’arrivai en France, le cou nu, il faisait tellement froid partout, dedans, dehors, en haut en bas et tout le long, je cherchais partout où me trouver et en vain. Non je n’étais pas venue en France, cet hiver, je n’y avais d’ailleurs jamais pensé à cet hiver appelé France. J’avais seulement enfin quitté l’Algérie en y laissant les plumes qui protègent l’endroit de vie.\textsuperscript{222} I arrived in France bare-necked, it was so cold everywhere, inside, outside, up down and all along, I searched for myself everywhere and in vain. No, I hadn’t come to France, that winter, I hadn’t in fact ever really thought about the winter called France, I had only at long last left Algeria plucked of the feathers that protect the place of life.\textsuperscript{223}  

\hspace{1cm} \textemdash \textsuperscript{\textasteriskcentered}Hélène Cixous,

\hspace{1cm}  \textemdash

Known for urging women to embrace their aptitude for creativity in “Le rire de la Méduse” ("Le rire")\textsuperscript{224} and La jeune née (La jeune),\textsuperscript{225} Hélène Cixous takes a sociopolitical stance among French feminists in the 1970s. Both theoretical texts address the importance of women to penetrate the male-dominated literary world by shedding their imposed roles of passivity and silence. In the first work, Cixous enthusiastically advocates a fight against silence and invisibility that women have suffered: “Il faut qu[e la femme] s’écrire parce que c’est l’invention d’une écriture neuve insurgée qui, dans le moment venu de sa libération, lui permettra d’effectuer les ruptures et les transformations indispensables dans son histoire[. . .]” (“She must write her self, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come,

\hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{222}Hélène Cixous, Les rêveries de la femme sauvage: Scènes primitives (Paris: Galilée, 2000) 157.

\hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{223}Translations of quotation from Cixous’s Les rêveries de la femme sauvage now and hereinafter are from Hélène Cixous, Reveries of the Wild Woman, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006), unless otherwise indicated.

\hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{224}Hélène Cixous, “Le rire de la Méduse,” Simone de Beauvoir et la lutte des femmes, eds. Catherine Clément and Bernard Pingaud (Marseille: l’Arc, 1975) 39-54.

\hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{225}Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, La jeune née (Paris: Union Générale d’Editions, 1975).
will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history [...]."

When women take an active stance, a transformation will result on personal, literary, and political levels. Through a new feminine form of writing, they will break the boundaries that trapped them into silence. Otherwise, "[u]ne femme sans corps, une muette, une aveugle, ne peut pas être une bonne combattante." ("[a] woman without a body, dumb, blind, can't possibly be a good fighter.") Instead, "[i]l faut tuer la fausse femme qui empêche la vivante de respirer" ("We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing"). Their words would speak the truth of woman's body and sexuality instead of bearing the "false woman" image that their patriarchal society had placed on them.227 Man would finally stop fearing her as the "dark/black continent" as "death," as the mythological "Medusa" or as the "abyss" because "Le 'Continent noir' n'est ni noir ni inexplorable." ("The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable.") Instead of fixing women "entre deux mythes horrifiants: entre la Méduse et l'abîme" ("between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss"), men would discover the reality of women: "[i]l suffit qu'on regarde la méduse en face pour la voir: et elle n'est pas mortelle. Elle est belle et elle rit." ("[y]ou only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.")228 By rewriting herself, woman would shed light on the fact that darkness


227 Cixous, "Le rire" 43; Cixous, "The Laugh" 338.

228 Cixous, "Le rire" 47; Cixous, "The Laugh" 341-42.
had never existed. She would show life where man thought only death resided and dispel the terrifying false myths of woman in order to reveal a beautiful laughing Medusa.

As a step toward showing Medusa’s radiant smile, women would need to overcome a language that man has governed and structured around himself. Since the “economy” of [woman’s] drives is prodigious,” she could “steal” it and “fly” with it: “voler.”229 With her maternal productive energy, she would stake her place in History where she had otherwise been absent.230 In *La jeuné*, Cixous and Catherine Clément convince women of their innate economy. The very nature of woman gives her the gift to engender life. As Cixous and Clément attest, woman is “toute appliquée à faire la vie, à faire l’amour, faire: inventer, créer” (“infinite intelligence, completely applied to making life, to making love, to make: to invent, to create”).231 While Cixous’s essentialist imagery of woman has received criticism because of its manner of drawing on biological traits of femininity, it nevertheless incites other women to join in the endeavor of exercising their creativity whether through writing or making art. In unity, sorority, and action, women will succeed in transcending the limitations of a patriarchal system such that the new History that she builds will surpass “men’s imagination.”232 In order to illustrate this transcendence, or rather this transgression of boundaries, Cixous introduces

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229 Cixous plays with the pun in “voler,” by pointing out that “[c]e n’est pas un hasard si ‘voler’ se joue entre deux vols, jouissant de l’un et l’autre et déroutant les agents du sens. Ce n’est pas un hasard: la femme tient de l’oiseau et du voleur comme le voleur tient de la femme et de l’oiseau” (“It’s no accident that voler has a double meaning, that it plays on each of them and thus throws off the agents of sense. It’s no accident: women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds”; Cixous, “Le rire” 49; “The Laugh” 344).


the idea of a “bisexualité fusionnelle” ("merger-type bisexuality"). When applied to life and writing, Cixous’s concept of bisexual fusion would unite both women and men in shaping language, life, and history without having one sex preside over the other.

At the same time, the “bisexual” amalgamation would nevertheless recognize the gender differences without canceling them out: a concept that Derrida’s poststructuralist notion of “parergon”—the “mix of outside and inside”—helps to inform. Women’s creativity gives them the liberty to cross the structured gender boundaries and categorizations just as that the “play” found within preset systems also allows movement. Enjoying a new undesignated “passe-partout” position, women can drift between inside and outside, real and imaginary, forgotten and remembered, and feminine and masculine, without remaining trapped within any particular frame. With this newfound freedom, they can furthermore recreate their identity. They would transform the formerly masculinized (or masculin-"eyed") body into one that restores a feminized (or femin-"eyed") woman. By escaping the male gaze, these women represent femininity first-hand as they incarnate it.

As a means of undergoing this trans-formation, woman can incarnate the creative space of art. Accordingly, while Cixous demonstrates her artistry through the medium of

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233 Cixous “Le rire” 46; Cixous, “The Laugh” 341.

234 Cixous “Le rire” 46; Cixous, “The Laugh” 341.


236 Derrida, “La structure” 410.

237 Derrida makes a clear indication that his definition of “passe-partout” concerns the part of a mounted painting—the matting—that separates the frame from the interior work.

writing, she finds her inspiration in painting. Comparing writing to painting in “Le dernier tableau de Dieu” (“Le dernier”), she identifies distinctions and commonalities. For example, painters have access to visual precision and freedom that Cixous envies. Words remain colorless for the writer. Instead of showing, she can only describe the appearance of a flower.\textsuperscript{239} Recognizing these limitations, she considers herself a “blind” painter. Blind to both colors and images, she can only paint in black(ness): “dans le noir” (“in the dark”). The “noir” in Cixous’s expression evokes both the figurative notion of blindness and also the literal color of ink.\textsuperscript{240} Moreover, her monochromatic writing resembles painting with “dead words.”

Yet rather than grieving her circumstance, she finds two paths to redemption: through her reader’s confidence in her words and through her own advantages as a writer. In the former instance, the reader’s faith in Cixous’s writing resuscitates the black lifeless words.\textsuperscript{241} In the latter, Cixous learns to appreciate the writer’s ability to describe reality at the myopic, microscopic level.\textsuperscript{242} She can reveal the intricate details of life from up-close. Understanding this advantage, she finds a compromise by writing “en direction de la peinture” (“in the direction of painting”).\textsuperscript{243} By modeling her writing after the compositions of Clarice Lispector, she produces texts that imitate painting and thus approach art. Cixous signals the brilliance of this Brazilian author’s literature in \textit{L’heure de Clarice Lispector}: “Clarice est le nom d’une femme capable d’appeler la vie par tous

\textsuperscript{239} Cixous, “Le dernier” 173 ; Cixous, “Coming” 106.

\textsuperscript{240} Cixous, “Le dernier” 174; Cixous “Coming” 106.

\textsuperscript{241} Cixous, “Le dernier” 175 ; Cixous “Coming” 107.

\textsuperscript{242} Cixous, “Le dernier” 177 ; Cixous, “Coming” 109.

\textsuperscript{243} Cixous, “Le dernier” 174; Cixous, “Coming” 106.
ses noms chauds et frais. Et la vie vient. Elle dit: je suis. Et dans l’instant Clarice est.”
(“Clarice is the name of a woman capable of calling life by all of its warm and cool names. And life comes. She says: I am. And in the instant Clarice is.”)\(^{244}\) For Cixous, Lispector represents a literary divinity whose words have the power to name life and to be life.\(^{245}\) Encouraged by Lispector’s example, Cixous writes with comparable ingenuity that steals phallocentric language and takes it to another level. Her artistic writing thus demonstrates optimism that envisions a promising future, a “tomorrow,” “what will be,” and the “imminence of.”\(^{246}\) At the same time, she admires the artists Monet and Hokusai because of their extraordinary persistence in repeatedly attempting to capture a particular mood or instant. Like a painter whom she fondly refers to as a “bird-catcher of instants” she also strives to catch the essence of every moment into words.\(^{247}\) With determination, she aims to paint-write a portrait of God: to achieve Lispector’s divine perfection in her art of writing.\(^{248}\)

This chapter will show how Cixous emulates “painting with words” in Les rêveries de la femme sauvage (Les rêveries) by using lyric prose while also developing powerful motifs that reflect her childhood past. Intertwining metaphorical imagery, philosophical anecdotes, and poetic reflections, she weaves together a symbolic tapestry-like narrative. For example, she links the idea of remembering to birth, the theme of loss

\(^{244}\) Hélène, Cixous, L’heure de Clarice Lispector (Paris: Des femmes, 1989) 55. Translation of quotations from Cixous’s L’heure de Clarice Lispector taken from Cixous’s English translation found in the same book.

\(^{245}\) Cixous, “Le dernier” 172; Cixous, “Coming” 105.

\(^{246}\) Cixous, “Le dernier” 181; Cixous, “Coming” 113.

\(^{247}\) Cixous, “Le dernier” 171; Cixous, “Coming” 104.

\(^{248}\) Cixous, “Le dernier” 199; Cixous, “Coming” 129.
and forgetting to war and death, and Algeria to her nanny Aicha. The coupled symbolisms of remembering/producing life, loss/war, forgetting/dying, and birthplace/nanny are examples of how Cixous poetically rewrites the past. At the same time, she blurs the dichotomies of feminine/masculine and Algerian/French. By illustrating how her identity consists of all yet none of these categories, she reveals the problematic circumstance and conflicting emotions that she had faced during the eighteen years of her life in Algeria. Nonetheless in the process of retelling her forgotten past—which requires the steps of remembering, recreating, and transcending—she demonstrates her extraordinary linguistic skillfulness through the use of puns, neologisms, and wordplay. In addition to reshaping literature (just as Baya renews painting), she gives birth to a new self. Cixous’s *Les rêveries* thus reveals a multipurpose project: a means to rewrite memories, to “voler” beyond the confining structure of language, and to recreate identity from a transpective vision.

Lost in Oblivion, Aborted from a Birthplace

This subsection examines the multiple recurring circumstances of loss and rejection that Cixous develops in *Les rêveries*. A misplaced manuscript, a father’s death, and exclusion from a birthplace illustrate the types of hardships that the narrator had suffered. She also endures the overwhelming sentiment of dispossession that consumes her while living in an impenetrable culture and communities. Mourning a forgotten past, broken relationships, orphanhood, and a lost homeland, the narrator recalls the misery of her childhood years. Despite the discouragement of fleeting memories and trying to
arrive in a closed land, she re-invokes her past in writing. Her efforts yield both the temporary victories of remembering and the despair of forgetting. Cixous’s book thus displays the erratic movement of reveries that fluctuate between themes of loss and recovery.

An undulating pattern that alternates from producing/birthing to losing/dying pervades Cixous’s Les rêveries. Opening with a theme of loss, the first scene sets the tone for the narration that follows: a series of losses that the narrator suffers concerning her birthplace and childhood.249 The narrator describes the overwhelming agony of having misplaced a set of pages that contained the essence of her memories of Algeria. The desperation that seizes her upon discovering the manuscript missing pushes her to the point of contemplating self-destruction: “je creusais ma tombe, indéniablement, l’idée de suicide commençait à imprégner la fosse du papier [. . .].” (“beyond a doubt I was digging my grave, the idea of suicide began to permeate the pit of paper [. . .].” 250 She felt as if she stood before a wall that she could only blindly grope at, only to find no door: an image that returns later in the book when the narrator attempts to physically revisit her house in Algeria.251 Her situation reminded her of a “horror film” in which she is dying an unending death: “On va mourrir et il n’y a pas de mort” (“One is going to die and there is no death”).252 The irrecoverable document epitomizes a lost object par

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250 Cixous, Les rêveries 12; Cixous, Reveries 4.

251 Cixous, Les rêveries 164-66

252 Cixous, Les rêveries 13; Cixous, Reveries 5.
excellence. Vanishing from sight, the memoirs not only represent a mislaid physical object, but also the memories that have fallen back into the abyss of the unconscious.

A pseudo-supernatural incident even coincides with the loss of the pages thus underlining the gravity of the narrator’s circumstance: a sudden change in the cosmos. At eleven in the morning the sky drastically darkens: “le ciel devint totalement noir, et il fit nuit. Je dis les faits. Cette nuit inouïe battue au tonnerre, mais sèche, dura une heure” (“the sky grew totally black, and night fell. This is a fact. This incredible night rumbling with thunder, but dry, lasted an hour”).253 This phenomenon is curiously similar to the Biblical description of the crucifixion of Christ: “At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.”254 In both cases, the skies darken at an unexpected hour—at eleven for the narrator of Les rêveries and at noon in the Book of Mark—as if to accentuate the catastrophic events. In the former case, the severity of the situation compares to losing “a treasure [that the narrator] couldn’t replace.” In the latter case, when Christ breathes his last breath with a “loud cry,” his family and followers undergo the despair of believing that they had forever lost a sacred Messianic king.255 Likewise, the four pages that “vanished into thin air” felt like “giving up a limb of [her] soul.”256 Whether or not Cixous had intended this parallel, she dramatically emphasizes this incident of debilitating loss by comparing it to spiritual dismemberment.

253 Cixous, Les rêveries 12; Cixous, Reveries 5.

254 The sixth and ninth hours would translate into 12:00p.m. and 3:00p.m. according to Barker et al.’s edition of the Bible (Mark 15:33).

255 Mark 15:33; Cixous, Les rêveries 17; Cixous, Reveries 7.

256 Cixous, Les rêveries 12, 17; Cixous, Reveries 5, 7.
Another image of loss that Cixous addresses in her text involves the notion of "expulsion." In fact, the narrator describes Clos-Salember as the site of "multiple and endless expulsions." Amidst the disarray of World War II, the father's medical profession ends in Oran as the anti-Semitic forces convert the city to "Vichy-in-Oran." The mother recalls how her husband's practice was halted: "on a dit à ton père vous ne pouvez plus travailler comme médecin" ("they told your father you cannot go on working as a doctor"). This expulsion from Oran obliges him to restart his career and his life in Algiers. This move becomes a way for him to "oublier et de recommencer une vie délivrée" ("forgetting [the brutalities] and beginning a new life"). Unfortunately, this new life ends literally and prematurely. He passes away at the age of thirty-nine from tuberculosis. Whether or not the narrator blames her father's tragic death on his forced displacement, she underlines the ominous connection that exists between the two events. When the family later faces expulsion from Algeria, the loss of her father becomes twofold. After losing the living father, his tomb also becomes "a lost grave." He remains buried in an inaccessible place: "Plus personne n'y va ou n'ira jamais." ("No one ever goes there any more or will ever go.")

257 This notion of "expulsion" becomes an important imagery that the paper will examine later.

258 Cixous, Les rêveries 61; Cixous, Reveries 35.

259 Cixous, Les rêveries 62; Cixous, Reveries 35.

260 Mireille Calle-Gruber and Hélène Cixous, Hélène Cixous, photos des racines (Paris: Des femmes, 1994) 209. The abbreviation HCR will replace Hélène Cixous, photos des racines. This chapter will offer a more detailed account of the father's death shortly.

Although the dislodgment of the mother from her profession does not provoke her physical death, it ends her life project. The Clinic that the mother oversaw in Algeria defined her existence. Referring to this location as a “mill for turning out babies,” the narrator considers it her mother’s “work of art.” This new-born-delivering facility constituted such an integral part of the mother that nothing aside from a forced expulsion could make her abandon it: “Elle était d’ailleurs si bien implantée dans le grand uterus que seule une violente manoeuvre abortive avait pu causer son délogement” (“She was furthermore so firmly implanted in the great uterus that only a violent abortive manoeuvre could have dislodged her”).\(^{263}\) Unfortunately, this moment of termination arrives. Nestled in the heart of the breeding ground of violence, the Clinic fell victim to utter devastation in 1971 despite the mother’s efforts to remain in Algeria. The bomb of destruction that enemies had laid under the facility hatched into an explosion, “entraînant la dévastation de toute la maison, la disparition Corps et Biens de La Clinique” (“causing the devastation of the entire house, the disappearance lock, tock, and barrel of the Clinic”). This event marked the “final annihilation” of the life work that the mother had established with complete dedication.\(^{264}\) With the mother’s life project demolished she had no reason to stay. Her invisible enemies had finally strategically eliminated her from the womb of Algeria like an aborted fetus.

Like the mother, the daughter also suffers the loss of a “work of art.” The situation that the narrator describes at the opening of Les rêveries alludes to the loss of

\(^{262}\) Calle-Gruber and Cixous, HCPP 191; Cixous and Calle-Gruber, HCR 189.

\(^{263}\) Cixous, Les rêveries 16; Cixous, Reveries 6.

\(^{264}\) Cixous, Les rêveries 42; Cixous, Reveries 22-23.
the five pages that represented her hopes of mentally returning to her birthplace. She too despairs losing a masterpiece that she had authored.\textsuperscript{265} Contrary to the mother, however, the narrator intentionally chooses her exodus from Algeria. While the former would never have left the country, the latter deliberately cuts the umbilical cord: “je fis volte-face et je rompis cet attachement” (“I about-faced and broke with this attachment”). Acting as her own existential surgeon, she severs her lifeline to Algeria. Yet despite her intentions to permanently abandon her birthplace, she later realizes that it continued to reside within her as a “land of memory” and a “Lost Paradise.” The childhood motherland that she longed for both during and after the years spent there, always remained a part of her. Her constant fear of the “disappearance of the maternal body” represents an unconscious phenomenon for her in Algeria.\textsuperscript{266}

The narrator’s experiences of exclusion and rejection had influenced her decision to abandon her birthplace. Facing marginalization from all sides due to her Jewishness and French nationality, she suffers from what she designates as an “Algerian disorder”: the unsettling notion of “être possédée par une sensation de dépossession” (“being possessed by a feeling of dispossession”).\textsuperscript{267} The narrator signals this condition from the opening lines of her book: “Tout le temps où je vivais en Algérie je rêvais d’arriver un jour en Algérie [...]” (“The whole time that I was living in Algeria I would dream of one

\textsuperscript{265} Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 16; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 6.


\textsuperscript{267} Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 16; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 7. From the combination of “maladie” and “Algérie,” Cixous also introduces the neologism, “malgérie.”
day arriving in Algeria [. . .]". Her brother also points out this reality by stating, "Tu n’a pas connu l’Algérie" ("You didn’t know Algeria"). His words underline the disorienting sentiment—the "Algerian disorder"—that the narrator had endured while residing there.

The narrator’s circumstance proves to be even more limited than her brother’s. While the brother uses his “crazy Bike” to discover Algeria, the sister finds herself isolated in her “absence au monde qu'[elle] désirai[t] plus que tout autre monde” (“absence in a world that [she] wanted more than anything in the world”). She struggles against the lingering feeling of dispossession as if in “combat pour conquérir l’introuvable qui peut [la] conduire à l’autodestruction” (“struggle to vanquish the unfindable that can lead to self-destruction”). Suffering the ubiquitous state of “externement,” she perceives herself as the “stubborn abortion.” Constantly faced with closed doors, violence, and discrimination, the narrator wrestles against the geographical, social, and psychological impenetrability of Algeria.

In order to illustrate the irreconcilable circumstance of living in perpetual exclusion, the narrator uses an anthropomorphic metaphor. Examining her past, she compares her efforts to "arrive" in Algeria to the endeavor of catching a person. The

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268 Cixous, Les rêveries 9; Cixous, Reveries 3.

269 Cixous, Les rêveries 19, 21; Cixous, Reveries 9, 10.

270 Cixous, Les rêveries 39; Cixous, Reveries 21. Instead of Brahic’s translation, I use mine to keep the literal meaning of original French expression.

271 Cixous, Les rêveries 52; Cixous, Reveries 29.

272 Cixous, Les rêveries 17; Cixous, Reveries 7.

273 Cixous, Les rêveries 126.

274 Cixous, Les rêveries 96; Cixous, Reveries 55.
human qualities of the country of Algeria emerge in the words “femme sauvage” (“woman of the wild”). While Cixous may not have chosen to equate this imagery to that which Kateb Yacine develops in his play, she likewise personifies Algeria into a desired yet un-possess-able entity. This country resembles a living being whom she hopes to acquaint intimately. Yet at an unspecified moment during her childhood, the need for this nation-person somehow vanishes over time: “cette personne me sort de la tête et tombe dans le passé” (“this person goes out of my head and becomes a part of the past”). After years of endless rejection, her initial love for her birthplace fades to the point where she gives up on chasing after the land-person.

After the narrator’s departure, the absence of Algeria reminds her of what she had loved and lost. The subtlest differences between her birthplace and her subsequent country of residence—France—evoke a nostalgic longing for the former location. In one scene, the narrator and her brother are recalling the various aspects of Algeria that they had taken for granted. Examining the life and environment of the “Hexagon,” they recognize dissimilarities that made the sea, sky, and pine trees seem foreign: “La mer n’est pas la mer, le ciel n’a rien à voir avec le ciel, les pins, quand je regarde les pins d’ici, je ne vois que des pins extérieurs” (“The sea is not the sea, the sky has nothing to do with the sky, the pines, when I look at the pines here, I only see foreign pines, nothing but

275 Bernard Aresu, Counterhegemonic Discourse from the Maghreb: The Poetics of Kateb’s Fiction (Dischingerweg: Gunter Narr Verlag Tubingen, 1993) 239; Instead of Brahic’s translation, I use Aresu’s “Woman of the Wild” to avoid the different connotations that “Wild Woman” can have.

276 Kateb’s play was entitled “La femme sauvage” and was published in Les lettres nouvelles 22 (février 1962) 7-25.

277 This chapter later examines how the narrator equates her nanny with the land and how she seeks to know her private life in order to know the country.

278 Cixous, Les rêveries 89; Cixous, Reveries 51.
reproduced pines”). When comparing certain elements of nature in France against the Algerian equivalents, the children perceive unfamiliar and unacceptable substitutes. For example, the pointed French pine tree seems absurd when contrasted to the Algerian species that majestically stretched out into “a graceful twisty velvety sunshade.”

While these observations seem superficial, they illustrate the unsettling reality that even the characteristics that the narrator might normally consider fixed—the sky and the sea—had changed.

In addition to sensing the absence of environmental features unique to Algeria, the narrator mourns a loss that her own father had provoked. As she and her father pass by a store, she notices a Moorish doll displayed in the windowsill. The object suddenly incites the narrator’s unexplainable and irrepressible need for it. Incapable of comprehending the daughter’s desperate longing for the doll, the father firmly declines her request. For him, the narrator’s demand appeared dismissible and childish. Her desire for a distinctly Muslim Algerian figurine even represented an act of transgression and madness that conveyed an “adulterous” mentality. Yet for the narrator, the toy was the “vital creature.” Every detail of this unforgettable girl doll represented what she desired to possess: an emblem of an otherwise inaccessible country. “She” incarnated everything about Algeria as if the life of the narrator resided within it: “Le Beau et la Beauté. Je vois tout. Je sais tout. Le Voile me dit tout. Je devine tout” (“Beauty and the Beautiful. I see it all. I know it all. The Veil tells it all. I can guess it all”).

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279 Instead of Brahic’s translation, I use mine to emphasize the foreignness of the French pines in contrast to the Algerian.

280 Cixous, Les rêveries 88; Cixous, Reveries 50.

281 Cixous Les rêveries 134-35; Cixous, Reveries 75-76.
the female gender of the doll evoked the narrator’s intense “desire of identification and love.” She identified with the femininity of the figurine and also perceived the mystery of Algeria within her. The father’s blunt refusal thus permanently marked the daughter with “the wound.” His “one time assault” remains a deep unpardonable “pain” of an “infinite faithfulness.” Time could not bring her to forgive her father leaving her asking: “How shall I forgive you?”

The narrator’s “mourning” of the doll incident not only signals a broken relationship with the father, but also becomes an unsettling precursor to the drama that she faces when she later loses her father to a terminal illness. In the autobiographical text Hélène Cixous, photos des racines (HCPR), Cixous discloses the events surrounding her father’s sickness and its progression to his death. After his appointment as a lieutenant-doctor in Tunisia in 1939, he contracts tuberculosis. Returning home, the father detaches himself from the rest of the family as if to hide his condition: a “disguised death.” This situation leaves both children with “effects of un-interpretable distancing.” While the father attempts to protect his own family from the disease that he knew would inevitably take his own life, he creates confusion and separation among those who desire to be near him. Describing the last moments prior to his passing, Cixous particularly notes the silence that dominates the scene: “Il ne parle plus [. . .] Il s’adresse à moi par


283 Cixous, Les rêveries 133. Instead of Brahic’s translation, I use mine in order to fit the sentence structure of this analysis.

284 Cixous, Les rêveries 135; Cixous, Reveries 76.

285 Instead of Brahic’s translation, I use mine to draw the parallel to the second “mourning” after the father’s death.

286 Cixous, Les rêveries 133.
signes” (“He no longer speaks[. . .] He addresses me with signs”). He stifles every aspect of his vitality: “Tout retenu: sourire, retenu, souffle, retenu, vie, retenue. Sans doute essayait-il de retenir le dernier souffle.” (“Everything held back: smile, held back, breath, held back, life, held back. No doubt he was trying to hold on to the last breath.”) As a physician, he knew of his highly contagious condition and the gravity of his irreversibly deteriorating health. He limited his actions to ones that would prevent the spread of his disease. While trying to withhold his remaining life, he takes his last opportunity to express his affection to his children. Cixous had responded to his silent presence and restrained gestures “abundantly” and “overabundantly.”287 Yet on February 12, 1948, she mourns again. Her father’s death is the last “wound” that permanently afflicts her life.288

As the images of the dying father indicate, the wounds of loss become a source of despair. Therefore as Segarra points out: “L’estompage de la mémoire est donc aussi craint que, parfois, désiré car il peut fermer les blessures que les souvenirs ravivent” (“The blurring of memory is therefore as feared as, at times, desired because this [circumstance] could shut [out] the wounds that memories revive”).289 Oblivion represents the initial coping mechanism for the narrator in Les rêveries. Having experienced rejection, injustice, and hatred from all angles, she could only think of escaping the nightmare. As a child, confined to the house and the backyard, her books become a means to forget the terrible realities surrounding her. Climbing up into a tree to read, she tells herself:

287 Calle-Gruber and Cixous, HCR 200-01; Cixous and Calle-Gruber, HCR 201.

288 Calle-Gruber and Cixous, HCR 209; Cixous and Calle-Gruber, HCR 209.

289 Marta Segarra, Leur pesant de poudre: romancières francophones du Maghreb (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997) 43-44. Translations of quotations from Segarra’s Leur pesant now and hereinafter are mine.
Je partirai, je laisserai toute l’Algérie Clos-Salembier derrière moi, je ne reviendrai plus jamais, même en pensée […] en lisant, et dans l’exaltation de la lecture […] je ne souffrirai plus jamais, je n’aurai plus mal aux aveugles, aux Arabes aux culs-de-jatte, il n’y aura plus trace de chien ni de lycée, ni de trolley, ni de bidonville, tout sera effacé, emporté anéanti […] ²⁹⁰

I will depart, I will leave all Algeria Clos-Salembier behind me, I will never come back, even in my imagination […] as I read, in the exaltation of reading […] I will never suffer again, I will never hurt for the blind, the Arabs, the cripples, there will be no trace of the dog, nor of the high school, nor of the trolleybus, nor of the shantytowns, everything will be erased, blown away, annihilated […] ²⁹¹

The pages of her book transform into a set of wings that allow her to flee the country’s misery. In reading, she finds a mental sanctuary that gives her the liberty to fly away with her imagination.

The narrator’s need for oblivion in Les rêveries reflects Cixous’s thoughts on the connection between reading and forgetting. In Or: les lettres de mon père (Or), Cixous explains how the two verbs—to read and to forget—necessarily intertwine: “[…] nous lisons et oublions nous lisons pour oublier, et deux fois oublier, oublier tout sauf le livre tant que nous en sommes les passagers enchantés, et ensuite oublier le livre qui se retire dans les limbes […]” (“[…] we read and forget we read in order to forget, and forget doubly, forget everything except the book while we are its enchanted passengers, and

²⁹⁰ Cixous, Les rêveries 79.

²⁹¹ Cixous, Reveries 45.
then forget the book that withdraws into the limbs [ . . . ]”). Consequently, re-reading signifies an act of “resusci(ing)-eras(ing)” or, as Cixous’s neologism proposes, “oublire” (“read to forget”). Yet Cixous also recognizes the need to fight against oblivion in order to remember what she formerly hoped to leave behind. If reading offers her a means to forget, writing represents a weapon of defense against forgetting. This activity denotes an “anti-oblivion” that helps her to restore a valuable part of her identity. Through a paradoxical yet inevitable “union” between “Oblivion” and “Memory,” Cixous believes that individuals can be reborn “at will.”

In Les rêveries, a scene illustrates this moment in which the narrator manages to intercept memory. The first few pages of the book describe the narrator’s miraculous experience of entering into the “Oblivion gallery” of her mind. As her memories dawn, she scribbles down what the “Comer”—a supernatural force of inspiration—dictates to her. She initially writes in the dark, having been unprepared for the Comer’s sudden arrival and also to avoid frightening the invisible “visitor” off. After transcribing a substantial portion of what had mentally recaptured, she finally switches on the light. The illumination in turn symbolically signals the long awaited moment of finally mentally “arriving” in Algeria. She compares her circumstance to the act of taking

\[ \text{\footnotesize 292 Hélène Cixous, Or: les lettres de mon père (Paris: Des femmes, 1997) 11-12. Translations of quotations from Cixous’s Or now and hereinafter are mine.} \]
\[ \text{\footnotesize 293 Or} 16. \text{Cixous introduces the neologism “oublire” by combining the two verbs “oublier” (“to forget”) and “lire” (“to read”) to create the sense of “read to forget”.} \]
\[ \text{\footnotesize 294 Cixous, “De la scène” 22.} \]
\[ \text{\footnotesize 295 Or} 16-17. \]
\[ \text{\footnotesize 296 Cixous, Les rêveries 9-10; Cixous, Reveries 3. The play with the symbolism of light and dark appears also in other sections of the text. Both at the opening and closing of the book, the narrator is sitting “in the dark” while trying to remember Algeria. On the one hand, the metaphoric significance of the “dark” indicates the obscurity of memories for which the narrator is searching. On the other, the darkness echoes} \]
communion: "sur ma langue de nuit l’hostie qui répand chair et sang du Venant dans mon corps" ("I held the Host to disperse the Comer’s flesh and blood through my body […] on my night’s tongue"). The “flesh” and “blood” of this inspirational Comer gave life to her writing just as the wafer and wine symbolize the spiritual redemption that the communion taker finds in Christ’s body and blood.297

The moment of the narrator’s supernatural enlightenment also resembles the inspiration of a painter who perceives everything and desires to capture everything onto canvas. Imagining the life of a painter, Cixous describes the simulated experience in “Le dernier”: "Si j’étais peintre, je verrais, je verrais, je verrais, je verrais, je serais affolée, je courrais sans cesse vers les saules têtards, vers les champs de pommes de terre" ("If I were a painter, I would see, I would see, I would see, I would see, I would be panic-stricken, I would run incessantly toward the pollard willows, toward the fields of potatoes").298 Mirroring Cixous’s description of her excitement as a painter, the narrator in Les rêveries feels the “racing heart beat,” the “vertigo,” and the “urgency” that presses her to produce five extraordinary pages of her past.299 Like a canvas still freshly wet from oil and paint thinner, the pages smelled of “encre la terre le galop la sueur les naseaux haletants […]” (“ink earth galloping sweat panting nostrils […]”).300

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297 Cixous, Les rêveries 10; Cixous, Reveries 3.

298 Instead of Cornell et al.’s translation, I use mine to keep the order in Cixous’s original text.

299 Cixous, “Le dernier” 175; Cixous, “Coming” 108.

300 Cixous, Les rêveries 10; Cixous, Reveries 3.
Unfortunately, despite the phenomenal invocation of the forgotten past, the narrator faces the dramatic end of misplacing the memories that she had secured onto paper. The only way for her to recover her written memoirs would be either by physically finding the lost pages (that never rematerialize) or by mentally recalling what she had written. Already challenged with inadequate recollections of the past, the lost pages represented a double setback for the narrator. The pitiful circumstance of needing to reconstruct fragments from fragments and to salvage memories of memories thus seemed unacceptable. With feelings of defeat and disillusionment concerning the irreplaceable pages and the increasing anti-Semitic hostilities, she leaves Algeria in 1955 resolved to never return to or write about this “high closed blankness,” the closed book of her birthplace.

Re-membering the Fragmented Body of Memories

Determined to forget Algeria, the narrator’s conviction holds firm for forty years—until she hears a familiar “memory of a dream of barking.” The distant cry renews her motivation to rewrite a twice lost (in memory and in writing) painful past. Although the narrator had left her birth country without desiring or expecting to return,

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301 Cixous, Les rêveries 12.

302 Cixous Les rêveries 167; Cixous, Reveries 95. Similar to the case of Baya, Cixous’s mental and physical “absence” from Algeria coincides with the Algerian War. Yet in the case of the author, the period of latency lasts for four decades instead of one. Cixous’s reluctance to write—the silence—again insinuates the gravity and complexity of the War.

303 Cixous Les rêveries 167; Cixous, Reveries 95.
she realizes that she had loved the very place that she thought she had hated. This section of the chapter thus explores the factors that cause the narrator to revisit a childhood ravaged by misery, anguish, and brokenness, and also the conflicting complications that impede her quest. On the one hand, a visceral force pushes her to search out systematically a lost and abandoned birthplace. On the other, her efforts initially prove to be ineffective. When trying the doors of her own memories, she encounters blocked entrances. Then, knocking on the collective memory of her family members, she gathers anecdotes that constitute a skeleton of her past. Fleshing out the gathered stories with poetic and semi-fictional description, she adds the vital organs to the textual framework. Writing thus becomes a corporeal act for Cixous where the sentences and paragraphs that she produces contain the rhythms of her body. She explains, "Personally, when I write fiction, I write with my body. My body is active, there is no interruption between the work that my body is actually performing and what is going to happen on the page." Yet writing with the body proves also to be a fragmenting experience: loss, treachery, orphanhood, and severed relationships remind her of the divided identity of her childhood. The narrative of wandering reveries—as opposed to a chronological storyline—exposes the dismembering process of re-membering.

Despite the various setbacks that the narrator had previously encountered, she feels a pressing desire to remember Algeria in the same way that Baya portrays a longing

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304 Cixous, Les rêveries 79.

305 The next section of the chapter will address this point of Cixous's poetic approach to writing.

for companionship and a motherly embrace. The persistent urge to arrive home becomes a recurrent motif in *Les rêveries*. The narrator and her brother repeatedly attempt “at all costs to enter and arrive” into the “réalité intérieure de ce pays qui était [leur] pays natal et pas du tout [leur]” (“the inner reality of the country that the country of [their] birth and not [theirs] at all”). As individuals “sick with love,” the two siblings have an unexplainable need for the “chair, de l’habitat, de l’arabité, de l’arabitude” (“flesh, from the habitat, from the Arabness, of the Arabitude”). The narrator’s desire for acceptance by the people, place, and culture of her birthplace inspires her to “draw[ ] the outlines of ghosts.” She invents her own illusions of Algeria in order to evoke the “arabité” that had always remained inaccessible to them.\(^\text{307}\) The continual yearning to return home thus pushes the writer to gather her scattered and fleeting memories.

Using writing as a probe, the narrator strives to explore and re-enter the various doors of her childhood residence.\(^\text{308}\) Yet these entrances create conflicting scenarios that comprise her “personal malady.” For example, the women Françoise\(^\text{309}\) and Aïcha represent entrances to France and Algeria respectively. With her Jewish heritage and French nationality, she has limited access to either person or culture. Instead of fitting into French, Arab, or Kabyle communities, the narrator suffers the isolating sentiment of exclusion. In addition to these principal imaginary gateways, she also recognizes the presence of other “invisible doors” within the high school that she attended.\(^\text{310}\) Although she does not explicitly elaborate on the significance of the invisible doors, the context

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\(^\text{309}\) Françoise literally means “French woman.”

\(^\text{310}\) Cixous, *Les rêveries* 123; Cixous, *Reveries* 70.
insinuates that they allude to the numerous social boundaries that she observes within the small academic community. Religion, ethnicity, social status, and nationality determine who is shut out or in.

As another door to Algeria, Oran signifies “une porte magique ouvrant sur l’autre monde” (“a magical door opening to the other world”). On the one hand, the country represents a place of numerous hardships: a “lost” childhood, the site of her father’s death and of his “lost grave,” and a nation of “multiple and endless expulsions.” On the other, despite the discrimination, exclusion, and hostility that characterized the family’s existence, Oran also resembles a “paradise” “pleine de rêves et de création” (“full of dreams and creation”). The city represents the birthplace of both Cixous and her creative writing. Although she never returns to Oran, she envisions this location as “white and gold and dust.” The pictorial and inspirational qualities of her natal city in turn had stimulated her writing. Thus the narrator’s reference to Algeria as the “hell of paradise” appropriately captures the country’s paradoxical qualities.

In an effort to piece together Algeria and to reconstruct memory, the narrator finds herself wandering in and out of the problematic doors to her past. Remembering thus symbolizes “par excellence de la migration et de l’errance” (“the archetype of

311 Cixous, “De la scène” 17.
312 Calle-Gruber and Cixous, HCPR 191; Cixous and Calle-Gruber, HCR 189; Cixous, Les rêveries 61; Cixous, Reveries 35.
313 Calle-Gruber and Cixous, HCPR 196; Cixous and Calle-Gruber, HCR 196.
314 Cixous, “De la scène” 16.
315 Cixous, Les rêveries 121; Cixous, Reveries 69.
migration and wandering”).\textsuperscript{316} The narrator’s vagrant search for memory moreover exposes her blindness. Although she feels the presence of the various doors of Algeria, some remain invisible to her. In order to locate them, she tries to use “tout ce qui substitue aux yeux, le pressentiment, la respiration, les oreilles du cœur, tous les autres organes doués de voir, et la pointe des doigts” (“everything that takes the place of eyes, pressentiment, breathing, the heart’s ears, all the other organs endowed with seeing, and the fingertips”).\textsuperscript{317} Even with her breath, the ears of her organs, and her fingertips, she fails to find the door to Algeria: “[Elle] allai[t] en toute vitesse, et pas nécessairement en avant, à toute vitesse seulement, [elle ne s’est] pas rendu compte tout de suite qu’[elle] n’y arrivai[t] pas, [elle] ne [s’est] pas rendu compte non plus qu'[elle] n’y arriverai[t] pas.” (“[G]oing faster and faster, and not necessarily ahead, only at top speed, [she] didn’t realize that [she] wasn’t getting there, [she] didn’t realize either that [she] would not get there.”) Precipitating in full speed in an unknown direction, she was futilely trying to arrive in Algeria.\textsuperscript{318}

Recognizing the shortcomings of a solitary wandering mind, the narrator next draws on the “collective memory” of the family.\textsuperscript{319} With her brother, she plays the game of “tuterappelles” (“doyouremember”) and they take a mental tour of different scenes from their nostalgic shared past. On their imaginary trek, they pass by familiar streets, shops, and forests. They walk through an “empty Museum” where they watch the “scenes” of a film in “black and white.” On occasion, one sibling would diverge toward

\textsuperscript{316} Soares, \textit{Leur pesant} 295.

\textsuperscript{317} Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 48; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 26.

\textsuperscript{318} Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 50; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 27.

\textsuperscript{319} Savona 95.
another memory that the other fails to remember. In such cases they would continue
down their independent paths of reveries. Using alliteration with the letter "b" the
narrator phonetically connects some of the nostalgic mental images to the word "bliss" in
order to suggest the happiness of their recollections. Through cooperative efforts, they
recompose their "page" of "bliss": "Ceci est notre page de bonheur. Nous étions dans le
b, dans le bain, dans l'ombre, arbres, brins ombrelles, bleu du ciel, tout est beaucoup et
sans fin et cependant bref [. . .]") ("This is our page of bliss. We were in the b's, in the
bath, arbor, bower, umbrellas, blue of sky, it is all so much and endless and yet brief
[. . .]"). Yet, when they reach the woods, a jolting and tragic realization stops them in
their tracks. Upon seeing the "Wood given by [their] father," sadness concerning the
deceased parent abruptly ends their blissful series of "b's."320

In addition to soliciting the brother, the narrator also turns to her mother as a
provider of information and anecdotes of Algeria. As the only surviving parent, she
becomes an integral contributor to the narration.321 For example, at a time when the
narrator was still too young to remember or fully understand the various conflicts that
provoked WWII, the mother recalls how "Vichy-in-Oran" had forced her husband to stop
his practice as a physician. Although his Jewishness had banned him from treating his
patients, the wife pretended to be a nurse and gave the necessary injections in his
place.322

320 Cixous, Les rêveries 85-86; Cixous, Reveries 49-50.
321 Savona 96.
322 Cixous, Les rêveries 62; Cixous, Reveries 35.
Other experiences that the mother shares concern events after her husband’s death. Determined to support the surviving family, she studies to become a mid-wife. Yet despite the intimate care that this woman had provided for the new mothers, she never experienced the hospitality of being invited to their homes. Then, over the decade that follows the “departure” of the French from Algeria in 1962, the mother falls victim to the ultimate gesture of alienation. While continuing her profession as a mid-wife, she took in the domestic worker Maria. Yet by welcoming Maria, the “angel of hate,” she had set up the suicide of her Clinic. Disguised as a maid, the woman schemed and ensured the closure of the mother’s facility. The calculated act of hatred against the mother exposed the discriminations of anti-Semitism, antiwidowism, and ultimately anti-foreignism that plagued the family’s Algerian existence.

If this collaborative family album of memorable anecdotes constitutes the skeleton of the book, the imaginative and poetic renditions of the stories designate the organs of the narrative. Cixous’s texts begin to incarnate the author as she writes fiction with her body: “You feel the rhythm of the body, you feel the breathing [...].” In the process, the writer gives life to Les rêveries where the “Bike” and the “Dog” delineate two of the book’s most vital organs. Due to the physical absence of these mementos, the narrator can further enjoy the liberty of re-imagining their pulsing presence and making them “more alive than ever before.” Referring to the two childhood icons as “Clos-Salembier’s signs,” she transforms them into symbols of her past. In fact, the narrator and her brother recognize how they had lived “sous [les] signes: la chaîne et le cadenas,

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323 Cixous, Les rêveries 159-65; Cixous, Reveries 91-93.

324 “Difficult Joys” 27.
le Chien et le Vélo, l'enfermement et l'évasion" ("under [the] signs: the chain and lock, the Dog and Bike, imprisonment and flight"). Along with the Bike and Dog, the narrator imparts symbolic imagery to other objects, places, and persons of her childhood. By implanting these organs into the narrative, she adds to the vitality of the body-text. Richly developing specific motifs, she denotes the important role that each of the "signs" had played in defining her life in Algeria: Fips as the archetype of confinement, the Bike as exploration, the "Book" as escape, Algiers and Clos-Salembier as war and death, the "Clinic" as birth and life, and Aicha as Algeria.\(^{325}\)

Foremost, Fips defines the narrator by signifying the "soul" of her life in Algeria. Arriving as the "Annunciation Dog," assuming the role of "King," "son of God," and "Master," this new family member becomes both "brother and child." With a rambunctious personality, Fips also earns the titles the "Furious," the "Fury in the Erinye family," and the "sacred Anger."\(^{326}\) Despite the noble beginnings of the dog's adoption into the family, his glory remains short-lived. With an impending War looming over the nation, this pet finds himself transformed from an idol of worship to a victim of betrayal. His existence gradually regresses to a "vie râtée enfermée dans la cage" ("flop of a life locked up in the cage").\(^{327}\) As the revolutionary uprisings started taking place in the neighborhood, the narrator recalls how the family had chained and encaged Fips. Even though hostilities began raining down around their home, the fear of the "carnage" that the dog could inflict on others outweighed his right to freedom. This gesture of locking

\(^{325}\) Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 71-72; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 41

\(^{326}\) Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 51, 73; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 29, 42.

\(^{327}\) Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 51; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 29.
him away represented the family's act of betrayal. They had put shackles on the "father's heir" and subjected him to "hell." While the intolerant surrounding communities had shut the household in, Fips faced a double imprisonment: the family had tied up their canine brother amidst their own incarceration.\(^{328}\)

When violence fell at their door, the chained and imprisoned brother-son could not fight, either in self-defense or to protect the family. Seeing Fips's rage, innocence, and unfortunate end, the narrator realizes the extent to which she identified with him: "Au Clos-Salembier, je ne voyais pas de fin, ni de pain, ni de paix, je ne savais pas, je ne croyais pas, mon cœur hurlait dans ma cage, Le Chien comme moi." ("In the Clos-Salembier, I saw no end, nor bread, nor peace, I didn't know, I didn't believe, my heart howled in my cage, the Dog like me.") Living within the constant tensions of "hatred" and "absurdity," she saw no end to the hunger, chaos, and hopelessness. The narrator and her adversaries resembled "mad dogs, each against the other" yet they remained "dogs left free." Even in their rage, they had the freedom to fight one another. Fips, on the other hand, found himself "réduit à l'impuissance totale, privé du droit à la réponse, déporté, livré à la folie des temps" ("reduced to total impotence, deprived of the right of reply, deported, handed over to the madness of the times"). Unjustly finding himself reduced to complete powerlessness, he signified the ultimate victim of the War's madness.\(^{329}\) He incarnated "le plus misérable des dieux et le plus divin de tous les misérables" ("the most wretched of the gods and most divine of the wretched").\(^{330}\) Fips

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\(^{328}\) Cixous, *Les rêveries* 76-77; Cixous, *Reveries* 44.

\(^{329}\) Cixous, *Les rêveries* 78; Cixous, *Reveries* 45.

\(^{330}\) Cixous, *Les rêveries* 73; Cixous, *Reveries* 43.
was a divine "king" who endured the greatest misery yet remained the most sacred of the miserable in the eyes of the narrator. Separated from and by his family, he lived out the rest of his life attached to the coldness of the iron chain that bound him into solitude.

Fips's life of royalty-to-"râté" ("failure")\textsuperscript{331} represents a "guide pour être vital être mortel et pour être trahi" ("guide as vital being as mortal being and as betrayed being"). Moreover, his situation foretells the events that were awaiting the family. The deterioration of the narrator and her family's circumstance in Algeria runs parallel to the "destiny" of Fips: his pitiful incarcerated condition. The narrator takes note of this reality by explaining that the "destin du chien [. . .] est la métaphore et le cœur de toute l'histoire, la transfigure de la famille et le résumé de nos Algériens" ("the destiny of the dog [. . .] is the metaphor and the heart of the whole story, the family's transfigure and the epitome of our Algerias").\textsuperscript{332} Fips ultimately summarized the family's stories of Algeria.

Upon the announcement of an independent Algeria, the household lost any right to choice, a voice, or life within the country. Amidst the complete national upheaval that brewed from infernal hatred and violence, they suffered the backbiting of former friends, imprisonment, and deportation.\textsuperscript{333} Despite the efforts of the mother and son to acquire the nationality of this country, they found themselves ultimately imprisoned. Given their complex nationality, ethnicity, and heritage, these family members found themselves "screened and rejected as French." The very people of their community—their supposed neighbors and friends—had condoned their incarceration.\textsuperscript{334}

\textsuperscript{331} Instead of Brahic's translation, I use mine to translate the expression "royalty-to-"râté."

\textsuperscript{332} Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 73; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 42.

\textsuperscript{333} Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 76-78.

\textsuperscript{334} Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 58; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 33.
On the one hand, Fip’s destiny paralleled the family’s existence in Algeria. On the other, the dog’s untamed personality characterized the narrator’s soul. She names him “My soul the Dog” and “My wild transfigure.” Fip’s “sauvage” nature conveys his free spirit that is “straining toward another world.” He constantly sought a place of freedom from his life of captivity. Likewise the narrator searched for a different world through her books: “Entre les attaques, je lisais. Je montais sur un livre, je m’asseyais sur la branche la plus éloignée du sol, je m’enfonçais dans les feuilles du livre, je décollais” (“Between attacks, I would read. I climbed into a book, I sat on the branch farthest from the ground, I plunged into the leaves of a book, I flew away”). Incapable of physically leaving the house and yard, she embraces literature and imagination as a means to fly off to another world. The narrator’s memory of Fip thus transforms him from a creature to the symbolic “transfigure” of the circumstances that she and her family had endured amidst the constant warfare that surrounded her home.

If Fip’s story signified the narrator’s life in Algeria, the Bike emulated the brother’s existence in the country. Long before the Bike’s arrival, it became both children’s object of adoration. Desiring to know a land that remained a “trésor plein de trésors auquels [ils] n’[avaient] pas accès” (“treasure full of treasures to which [they] had no access”), they believed the bike would be the “tool” with which they could reach the

335 Cixous, Les rêveries 73; Cixous, Reveries 42. Within the neologism “transfigure,” Savona interprets “trans” as the “désir d’aller au-delà des apparences, de comprendre et de transcender la figure du chien” (“desire to go beyond appearances, to understand, and to transcend the figure of the dog”; my translation) while the “figure” refers to both the literal “face” of Fips and the symbolic “figure” of the dog (99). On the one hand, the narrator feared the dog’s “visage épouvantable” as Savona points out (Cixous, Les rêveries 77). Deranged by the violence and his incarceration, his wild face becomes a “figure d’une altérité bouleversante” (“the face of an upsetting [form of] otherness”; Savona 99).

336 Cixous, Les rêveries 75; Cixous, Reveries 43.

337 Cixous, Les rêveries 79; Cixous, Reveries 45.
treasures. Their obsession for the idolized object “[les] changeaient en fous occasionnels” (“occasionally drove [them] crazy”). Triggered by the desperate yearning to enter into their birthplace, their folly revealed an underlying “Désalgérie” (“Des/DisAlgeria”): the urgency to know the untouchable nation.

When not consumed by madness, the two children converted to and practiced bike worship: “[leur] propre religion à peine connue” (“[their] own religion which [they] barely knew”). The capitalization of a normally non-proper noun—Bike—further emphasizes the holy stature of the object. Other names of reverence that they conferred upon the bike include “Velocity” and “Victory,” indicating the role that it would potentially play in non-violently conquering the country. Likewise, it symbolized a “door on wheels” to Algeria, to the world. This “Object” represented the “Life-Thing,” “Key-Thing,” and “Sent-Thing.” It symbolized a sent blessing by acting as the key to knowing the life of Algeria.

To further illustrate the idealization of the bike-“Thing,” the narrator recounts a picturesque scene in which she visualizes the “Vélo […] flottant haut dans [leur] rêves comme un cerf-volant à deux roues que [son] frère voyait nettement chatoyer et dont [elle], plongée dans le flou de la myopie [elle] voyai[t] seulement le reflet irisé dans les

338 Cixous, Les rêveries 57, 22; Cixous, Reveries 32, 11.
339 Cixous, Les rêveries 28; Cixous, Reveries 14.
340 Instead of Brahic’s translation, I use mine in order to account for the multiple connotations that exist in the original French neologism.
341 Cixous, Les rêveries 69.
342 Cixous, Les rêveries 29; Cixous, Reveries 14.
343 Cixous, Les rêveries 22-23; Cixous, Reveries 11.
344 Cixous, Les rêveries 54; Cixous, Reveries 30.
pupilles étrangement liquides de [son] frère [. . .]” (“Bike [. . .] drifting in [their] dreams like a two-wheeled kite that [her] brother saw shimmering and that [she], plunged in a myopic haze, only saw as an iridescent reflection in [her] brother’s strangely liquid pupils [. . .]”). The dream bike drifts across the daydreaming minds of the children like the apparition of a sacred winged figure to the devoted Bike disciples. The narrator’s allusion to her myopic condition and the caricature of her brother’s liquid eyes moreover add a touch of playful humor to the scene that depicts childlike adoration.

The story of the Bike that had started out with divine expectations, however, ended in utter disappointment. When the mother finally provides her children with the Bike, they find a “girl’s bike” waiting for them: “Quel coup! Totalement imprévu. Fatal.” (“What a shock! Totally unforeseen. Fatal.”) With the shattered dream of their “imaginary wheels,” they stare with dismay and disbelief at this version of what they had “guettésuppliéspéré encensé” (“lookedforbeggedforhopedfor praised to high heaven”) for so long. Accordingly, the narrator begins seeing nightmares of her brother that contrast with the scene of the idolized flying bike. To her horror, her infuriated brother pedals the Bike into the depths of the “Ravin de la Femme Sauvage”: “C’est le cauchemar du Ravin de la Femme Sauvage. Il me revient à présent comme hier mon petit frère tombe comme une pierre” (“It’s the Woman of the Wild Ravine nightmare. It comes back to me now as if it were yesterday how my little brother drops

345 Cixous, Les rêveries 29; Cixous, Reveries 14.
346 Cixous, Les rêveries 30; Cixous, Reveries 15.
347 Cixous, Les rêveries 21; Cixous, Reveries 10.
348 Again, instead of Brahic’s translation, I use Aresu’s “Woman of the Wild” to avoid the different connotations that “Wild Woman” can have.
like a stone”). When describing the position of the body of her brother, she compares it to that of a stone figure in prayer: “De lui on ne voit plus se lever vers le ciel que les deux petits bras de jambes convulsées, prière de pierre moitié noyée” (“All you see of him are his two little arms of convulsed legs raising toward the sky, a half-drowned prayer of stone/Pierre”). Through the metaphors of legs as arms in prayer and the brother Pierre as a stone half-drowned in the ravine, she plays with the versatility and expressivity of language.

While representing a core component of the narrator’s childhood experiences in Algeria, the Bike also becomes an emblem of the tension in the sibling relationship. Although the narrator felt guilty about the episode with the “girl’s bike,” she felt victimized by the circumstance. The mother “trahissait objectivement la nature de mon frère,” (“objectively betray[ed] my brother’s nature”), but she simultaneously “avait manifesté l’intérêt qu’elle prenait à [la] voir faire du vélo” (“had shown her interest in seeing [her daughter] become a Biker”). Believing that a “girl’s bike” could substitute as a “unisex Bike,” the parent thought of the son while also favoring the daughter. The sister could not help the mother’s decision yet she understood the traumatic effect that it had made on her brother. Enraged at first, the son later defies his humiliation by riding the bike and reversing “fate.” He turns the tragedy to his advantage by riding the bike

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349 In recounting this dreamed incident, the narrator uses poetic description. She plays with the name of her brother, Pierre, and illustrates his dramatic plummet into the ravine as resembling that of a “stone.”

350 Cixous, Les rêveries 31; Cixous, Reveries 15. I slightly alter Brahic’s translation to account for the “drowned” imagery and the word play of stone/Pierre.

351 Cixous, Les rêveries 26, 25, 23; Cixous, Reveries 13, 12, 11.

352 Cixous, Les rêveries 23; Cixous, Reveries 11.
as his “crazy Bike.”\textsuperscript{355} The Bike consequently signifies the object of conflict that divided the two children.

While the “crazy Bike” enables the brother to escape the confined existence of Clos-Salembrer, the Book provides the sister with a means of evasion. The narrator creates a parallel between the Bike and the Book by the way that they both offered the children an outlet from an otherwise incarcerated lifestyle. By reading and pedaling, the two siblings could break out of the boundaries of the home. The narrator develops another neologism that combines the two distinct activities into one: “je lis comme il pédale comme je lis nous pédalisons de toutes nos forces emportés par des pentes dangeureuses” (“I read as he pedals the way I read we pedalread\textsuperscript{354} with all our strength, swept away by dangerous descents”).\textsuperscript{355} By “pedalreading,” they jointly taste the adventure of dangerous slopes in the respective geographical and literary territories that they explore. Providing equal paths to temporary freedom, the Book and the Bike relieved the children of the daily internment and “externement”\textsuperscript{356} of a closed nation: “Livre et Vélo [les] transportent l’un comme l’autre, tout ce que l’on demande c’est la levée d’écrou” (“Book and Bike transport [them] equally, all that [they] ask is to be released”).\textsuperscript{357}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 39; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 21. Instead of Brahic’s translation, I use mine to keep the literal meaning of original French expression.
\item Instead of Brahic’s translation, I use mine to account for the hybrid meaning of the original French neologism.
\item Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 83; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 47.
\item Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 126.
\item Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 82; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 47.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Given the context of her family and the increasing unrest in Algeria, the Book symbolizes an even more valuable source of diversion. Through the capitalization of Book, the narrator again emphasizes the sacred function of literature during her childhood. It became “light,” “peace,” “reality,” “sleep,” and “bread”: the essential elements of her existence. Additionally, by reading, the narrator could drift away on the back of a donkey, a plane, an eagle or a chariot. She could pedal, fly or ride away into another reality and flee the destitution around her. Amidst the ongoing wars that became the “abyss” or the “nut” of entrapment, the siblings used objects as lifesavers.358

Shifting from objects to places, the narrator perceives Algiers as the City of “Hell.” Although she recognizes the positive comparisons that “so many people of all sorts of origins” had often made between Algiers and Venice or Rome, she can only taste the bitter bile of dishonesty that saturated the city. A combination of deception and violence transformed the place into a “gigantic poisoned layer cake.” Beneath the misleading icing of “beauty” and “pleasure,” the city revealed its true corrosive composition. The narrator describes it as “elaborately deceitful and deceptive” completely infected with “lie[s]” and “skulduggery.” The profuse deceit and trickery rendered the metropolis “inguérissable” (“incurable”)—or rather “in-guerre-issable”360—and untrustworthy. Serving as a breeding ground for “eggs of war,” the city engendered one battle after another incapable of ever being cured of war. Automatically a “victim

358 Instead of Brahic’s translation, I use mine to maintain a more literal translation.

359 Cixous, Les rêveries 82; Cixous, Reveries 47.

360 The notion of an “incurable” war: “in-guerre-issable.”
complice coupable ou contaminé” (“victim partner in crime guilty party or contaminated”) in every street or shop, the narrator had to fight battles on a daily basis. 361

Likewise, the district of Clos-Salembier exemplifies a particularly war-infected site of destitution. This community represented a “vaste société extrêmement misérable mais algérienne” (“vast and extremely downtrodden but Algerian society”). 362 Living in a place of relentless suffering and antagonism, the two children found themselves needing to constantly fight off attacks “toute à la fois et sur plusieurs fronts de dos de face de côté sous le bras nez à nez [. . .]” (“all at once on several fronts, from behind and head on and off to one side under the arm eyeball-to-eyeball [. . .]”). 363 The only way for the brother and sister to defend themselves from these multifaceted and constant enemy assaults was by joining forces as “original sworn brothers.” 364

The narrator frequently experienced a “double war” amidst the “child monsters.” On the one hand, she partook in the fights “among boys” by assuming the role of “brother” to her brother. The competitions between muscles, bats, private parts, and mob signatures represented a part of her world. On the other, the overarching theme of the children’s war like the adults’—“same against others”—sexually isolated her as a “girl without [her] brother.” 365

361 Cixous, Les rêveries 40-41; Cixous, Reveries 21-22.

362 Cixous, Les rêveries 61; Cixous, Reveries 35.

363 Cixous, Les rêveries 39; Cixous, Reveries 21.

364 Cixous, Les rêveries 20; Cixous, Reveries 10.

365 Despite the fraternal unity that she gained from her sibling, he could never be a sister to her in her femininity. Without “sister,” “brother” or “amie” (“friend” (feminine)) she usually found herself fighting a one girl battle and experienced the terrible feeling of “dirtying”: a sentiment of moral violation that had pushed her close to suicide (Cixous, Les rêveries 44; Cixous, Reveries 23-24.).
To further elaborate on the variety of combats and enemies that existed in Clos-Salembier, the narrator comments on the various war themes that she had observed. Discrimination against gender produced “guerre des sexes guerre brute crue guerre pareille à la guerre des roses une affaire d’épines et de roses guerre des sexes écorchés” (“war between the sexes brutal crude war like the War of the Roses a matter of thorns and of roses war between the scorched sexes”). In turn, racism, anti-Semitism, and “antiwidowism” commanded the other clashes. The participants of these battles included a majority of the national, ethnic, and social groups that comprised the urban community. The French “basic” racist mentality had established a self-affirming “racine raison socle piliers société culture coutume” (“root reason foundation stone pillar society culture custom”). The multiplying supporters of “gesunder Antisemitismus” consisted of individuals among the “Français français d’Algérie espagnols arabes corses médecins fonctionnaires avocats” (“French Algerian French Spanish Arabs Corsican doctors civil servants lawyers”) instigating daily acts of intolerance toward Jewish people.366

Yet beyond the actual fighting, the most upsetting aspect of these conflicts were the turned backs of betrayers. The family thus had developed an unusual relationship with their adversaries: “[leurs] ennemis étaient [leurs] amis” (“[their] enemies were [their] friends”). The friends with whom the two siblings had shared “parentés et communauté d’origine, de destin, d’état, d’esprit, de mémoire, de toucher, de goût” (“kinship and communities of origin, by destiny, by [their] manner of thinking, by memory, by touch, by taste”) transformed into opponents. On account of “error” and “confusion” felt on all sides, the friends whom the narrator loved and with whom she had

identified most turned foe. To her despair, despite her efforts to "be on their side" and her desire for "their City" and "their Algeria," she received only injuries.\(^{367}\) Upon the death of the father, the supposed "friends" of the family all, without exception, rejected the narrator's household. Closing their doors to the needs of the widow and her family, they demonstrated a sharply targeted "antiwidowism."\(^{368}\) The hostility that remained dormant while the father was alive, awoke after his death: "l'hostilité vient des temps les plus anciens, sous le règne de mon père elle dormait, lui parti, elle s'est réveillée, elle se lève comme elle s'était couchée, hirsute, débridée" ("hostility is handed down though the ages, during the reign of my father it slept, with him gone it has reawakened, up it rises just as it lay down, shaggy, unbridled"). The narrator thus believes that hatred had been "pre-exist[ent]" and had simply escalated during its long period of slumber.\(^{369}\)

Despite the violence and treason, the narrator knew that Algiers also housed the best of Algeria: the mother's "Clinic."\(^{370}\) Erected as a maternity shelter, the facility symbolizes the mother's creation and "chef d'œuvre" that had brought several hundred newborns into the world each year.\(^{371}\) In the midst of the surrounding treachery and death, the Clinic signifies "protohistory": the intermediary period between prehistoric and historic. Representing a time when humanity begins taking form, intimacy prevails. The mothers enter the delivery room, naked, to give birth to naked infants. The space serves a

\(^{367}\) Cixous, Les rêveries 44-45; Cixous, Reveries 24.

\(^{368}\) Cixous, Les rêveries 43-44; Cixous, Reveries 23.

\(^{369}\) Cixous, Les rêveries 75; Cixous, Reveries 43

\(^{370}\) Cixous, Les rêveries 41; Cixous, Reveries 22.

\(^{371}\) Cixous, Les rêveries 15.
pure and extraordinary function: the “only place and time” in which new lives come into the world.\textsuperscript{372}

Unfortunately, even this life-giving sanctuary was sitting prey to the imaginary and real knives of the city and eventually falls victim to the festering destructive and treacherous forces of the City of death. First, the Clinic folds under the deceitful activities that the “angel of hate” had coordinated. Then, in 1971, it comes to a terrible end due to a devastating explosion in the basement of the building.\textsuperscript{373} The mother had established her Clinic in the heart of Algiers only to watch it succumb to a malignant tumor that had been growing in its womb. The cancer of death—implanted by the Concierge of the building—emerges into complete devastation. By underlining this tragic detail, the narrator reinforces the inescapable malevolence that was rampaging the city.

While the Clinic represents the “Cradle” of Algiers, Aîcha symbolizes the arms and breast of Algeria’s maternal embrace. Unable to touch or hold the impenetrable nation in any other way, the narrator writes about how she had yearned for the nanny. As a child, she would nestle into, feel, and observe every possible detail of Aîcha.\textsuperscript{374} Even her name contains the sensual sound of reassuring caresses.\textsuperscript{375} The woman incarnated Algeria by representing “la seule Algérie qu’[elle ait] pu toucher frotter retoucher tâter palper [. . .]” (“the only Algeria that [she was] ever able to touch rub against touch again

\textsuperscript{372} Cixous, L’es r\'everies 41; Cixous, Reveries 22.

\textsuperscript{373} Cixous, L’es r\'everies 41-42.

\textsuperscript{374} Cixous, L’es r\'everies 90.

\textsuperscript{375} Cixous, L’es r\'everies 93. The narrator later indicates that in actuality, “Aîcha” had only been a pseudonym.
handle stroke [. . .]". The person and the place become interchangeable to the point where Aïcha offered the narrator a direct corporeal connection to the nation.

Although the narrator had pressed herself against the bosom of Aïcha during her years in Clos-Salemier, however, she never went to the nanny’s home. Moreover, Aïcha’s tactile and quantifiable qualities yielded little information about her private life. In fact, her name even turned out to be a pseudonym for her true name, Messouda. The details that the narrator could know—much like the land of her childhood—remain superficial and exterior to the hidden realities. Trying to imagine the nanny’s home and life, the narrator envisions a dwelling “en carrelage ou en tôle ondulée” (“tiles or corrugated tin”). She is a mother who becomes “pain le gâteau les fruits les puits l’ombre le repos canaan l’amour de l’agneau pour les mamelles le salut” (“the bread the cake the fruit the well the shade the repose canaan the love of the lambs for the mother’s udders salvation”), yet only for her real children.

Then, when Aïcha’s bodily presence disappears, the narrator transforms her from human to glorified icon. After this woman’s death, her remnants still exist in “volumes and volumes.” She turns into a figure of such uncontainable significance and worth that the narrator would have “sold [her] soul” for her. The nanny signifies a valuable part of the narrator’s Algerian childhood and embodies the country to the point where she becomes transfigured into an archetypal art form. As the narrator’s idol, Aïcha designates the “beauté du mou, beauté rare et difficile” (“beauty of the soft, a rare and

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376 Cixous, Les rêveries 90; Cixous, Reveries 51.
377 Cixous, Les rêveries 90.
378 Cixous, Les rêveries 93.
379 Cixous, Les rêveries 92; Cixous, Reveries 53.
difficult beauty”). A fusion between terrestrial and corporeal, the soft, rare, and difficult beauty of Algeria-Aïcha takes the form of a human landscape: “Les grands seins mous mal accrochés à la corde exprès, ce qui leur donne une autonomie à chacun. Les ronds des yeux entièrement marron mouillés luisants comme des lunes brunes contournées au khôl [. . .]” (“The flabby breasts deliberately badly hitched up, which makes each one autonomous. The round eyes, wholly brown wet glistening like brown moons outlined in khol [. . .]”). These features of Aïcha only represent a few among the “interminable nombre [de parties] qui la compose” (“the endless number of shes of which she is made”). Another central organ of the narrator’s story of Algeria, Aïcha represents the “nom de [l’] Histoire du Clos-Salembier” (“name of [the] Story of the Clos-Salembier”).

The organs of Les rêveries—Fips, the Bike, the Book, Algiers, Clos-Salembier, the Clinic, and Aïcha—thus embody Algeria as the epitome of loss and oblivion. Although Les rêveries consequently illustrates a fragmented and coded depiction of the family’s experiences in the country, Cixous’s La venue à l’écriture (La venue) further elucidates on the experiences of exclusion. When the entire family is finally forced to leave Algeria, they find themselves reduced to ultimate strangers, foreigners to the entire world. Needing to integrate themselves into another nation, they learn to heed the advice: “Prends la nationalité du pays qui te tolère” (“Take the nationality of the country that tolerates you”). Cixous perceives her condition as becoming “nobody,” “a little scrap from elsewhere” who remains placeless because of her state of nothingness. She

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380 Cixous, Les rêveries 91-92; Cixous, Reveries 52-53.

381 Cixous et al. La venue 23; Cixous, “Coming” 15.

382 Cixous et al. La venue 23; Cixous, “Coming” 16.
becomes an orphan of her maternal birthplace, severed from the umbilical cord. Unable to claim Algeria as her motherland due to the inevitable sociopolitical post-War complications, she still senses the emptiness of a child losing a parent and the resulting struggle of living with an incomplete divided identity.

Yet even before Cixous’s departure from Algeria, she had already noticed her “double” existence. For example, Oran signifies a birthplace for her on two levels. The city “pleine de quartiers, de peuples, et de langues” (“full of neighborhoods, of peoples, of languages”) not only represents the site of her biological birth, but also the “natal land” of her writing.383 While spending her childhood in this linguistically and ethnically diverse setting, her passion for writing takes form like an embryo in a womb. Her writing grows with her, traveling with her across timeframes and geographical borders. In moments of inspiration—like the arrival of the Comer at the beginning of Les rêveries—she gives birth to accounts of her past that are waiting to be written.384

In addition to the double beginnings that Cixous experiences in Algeria, she also recognizes the plural nature of her ethnic roots. The autobiographical text HCPR provides the first complete record of Cixous’s family background. Her Jewish maternal lineage originates in Germany. Her mother, Eve, along with her maternal grandmother had assumed influential roles in her childhood. In particular, the mother sought to “conter et ressusciter dans [son] enfance comme un immense Nord dedans [son] Sud” (“to recount and resuscitate itself in [her] childhood like an immense North in [her]

383 Calle-Gruber and Cixous, HCPR 183; Cixous and Calle-Gruber, HCR 182.
384 The paper will come back later to this notion of writing as a birthing.
South"). At the same time, this Northern territory of Cixous’s identity also knows a violent history of wars, as if humanity “advanced from war to war.” Yet due to the changing nationality of the grandmother’s birthplace, Strasbourg, she acquires a dual German-French nationality. Traveling from war to war, the Northern force encounters Cixous’s paternal South. Also of Jewish lineage, her father’s ancestors had found themselves driven out of Spain into Morocco and eventually into Algeria. He therefore came from a family that predominantly spoke French and Spanish.

By examining these “so strange roots,” Cixous realizes how distant they seem to her with respect to where she had ended up. She perceives her blood as “my foreigner.” This life source becomes a foreigner-companion with whom she had traveled. Yet knowing the incredible history and plurality of her foreign roots, she exclaims: “what a way we have come.” In this phrase, “we” accounts for the diversity of her roots. The plural pronoun represents the history of her dual pre-Algerian ancestry, the subsequent migrations, the gradual convergence of her maternal North with her paternal South in Algeria, the Hélène-et-Pierre feminine-masculine couple, the pre-, during and post-War family relocations, and her final departure for Paris.

As a result of Cixous’s plural heritage, she finds her sense of belonging constantly questioned. Born in Algeria and labeled French, Cixous had always felt a disconnection with regard to her identity. She had felt “homeless,” particularly due to the undermining


387 Calle-Gruber and Cixous, *HCR* 190; Cixous and Calle-Gruber, *HCR* 188.


effects of the Algerian War. One day she found her title as French temporarily annulled; another moment it was restored to her, miraculously and unexplainably. The fortuitous nature of her nationality had destabilized her identity: “En Algérie, je n’ai jamais pensé que j’étais chez moi, ni que l’Algérie était mon pays, ni que j’étais française. Cela faisait partie de l’exercice de ma vie: je devais jouer avec la question de la nationalité française qui était aberrante, extravagante.” (“In Algeria I never thought I was at home, nor that Algeria was my country, nor that I was French. That was part of the exercise of my life: I had to play with the question of French nationality which was aberrant, extravagant”). Feeling that she belonged to neither country, she learned instead to “play” with what remained accessible to her: the French nationality.

The personal details of Cixous’s life seep into the pages of Les rêveries and reveal the sense of identity-disorientation with which she wrestles. The narrator’s circumstance illustrates Cixous’s challenged sense of subjectivity, particularly through multiple images of dismemberment that rematerialize throughout the book. She must maneuver through a world of paradoxes and dualities where everything appears separate yet remains inseparable. The first striking image of a double life concerns the story of the Bike. When the brother flies into fury about the “girl’s bike,” the sister follows him as he storms out into the garden behind the house. Carrying an iron bar, he seeks vengeance on whatever tree or object he could find. Just as he says, “if I had a rat,” they see one emerge. Possessed by his rage, the brother immediately strikes the creature with his weapon and severs it in half. The narrator describes the scene as an unraveling chaotic

390 Calle-Gruber and Cixous 206; Cixous and Calle-Gruber, HCR 204.
391 Cixous, Les rêveries 31.
nightmare. She recalls the jumbled sounds and images of her screams of escalating horror and intensity, the twisting body of the dying rat, and the brother staggering, silent in thought. At that moment, the dreadful thought creeps into her mind that the rat had died in the place of the mother.392 Moreover, the image of the body of the creature cut in two underlines the sense of duality within the relationships and sense of belonging in her own life.

The unforgettable rat incident becomes emblematic of the different levels of brokenness that the narrator endures within her family and within Algeria. For example, the Bike that had originally united the narrator and her brother ironically becomes the point of their separation “despite him despite [her].” A “girl’s bike,” it discriminates against the brother and consequently upsets the sister. Although the mother had favored the daughter, the narrator only rides it once before abandoning it. The Bike subsequently becomes the brother’s signature “crazy Bike.”393 The two children thus take diverging paths. The sister grieves the disappearance of the intimate bond that she formerly had with her brother and notices how their shared inner life was separating into two exterior lives: “notre vie intérieure coupée en deux vies extérieures et coupée de moi-même” (“our internal life cut into two outer lives, and cut off from myself”).394

The rift forming between the sister and brother concerning the Bike takes symbolic evidence in another scene. After spending a night away from home as an act of defiance toward the mother, the brother returns to the house. While nursing his pride, he

392 Cixous, Les rêveries 33; Cixous, Reveries 16.
393 Cixous, Les rêveries 39.
394 Cixous, Les rêveries 142; Cixous, Reveries 80.
thinks of the unhappiness that he had caused his mother by rejecting her gift. Reluctant about stepping into the house, he hesitates outside of the entrance. Although the narrator waits on the inside and beckons him, she notices a physical and psychological separation: “[e]ntre nous le portail, l’impossible” (“[b]etween us the gate, the impossible”). The narrator incorporates the imagery of a barrier—the gate—to signify the impossibility of the brother to make amends with the mother or the sister: respectively the provider of and reason for the “girl’s bike.”

Like the divisions forming within the family, segregation characterizes the narrator’s relationship with her neighboring communities in Algeria. While residing in Clos-Salembier, the narrator “ne désirai[t] que [la] Ville et [l’]Algérie” (“desired nothing more than [the] City and [ ] Algeria”). Nevertheless, she finds herself fulfilling a dual role among the French and Arabs. In the presence of the French she becomes “exultation arms” or a welcomed secret weapon. Yet upon the arrival of Arab individuals, she transforms into “hope and wound.” Appearing to fulfill both positive and negative functions, she felt “inséparable” (“insep-arab[le]”). a notion she defines as an “unlivable relationship with oneself.”

In the eyes of the other Algerian-born French, the narrator and her family become “des cygnes malpropres mais promis à la réparation” (“ugly ducklings but promised redress”). Due to their Jewish background, they appear French yet not French. For the Algerian society, the father represents nothing more than the “déchet craché destitué des

395 Cixous, Les rêveries 36; Cixous, Reveries 18. Instead of Brahic’s translation I use mine to underline the gravity of the situation.

396 Instead of Brahic’s translation I use mine to indicate the wordplay in Cixous’s original neologism.

397 Cixous, Les rêveries 45; Cixous, Reveries 24.
François” ("piece of detritus spit out rejected by the French"). Moreover, his decision to practice as a physician in a non-lucrative location (Clos-Salembier) makes his character even more questionable. No normal doctor seeking financial and professional promise would willfully choose to work under such circumstances.\footnote{398}{Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 45-46; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 24-25.}

The neighbors consequently view the father as an “arabizarre” who had started a “faux mouvement de l’histoire de ce pays” (“anomaly in the history of this country”). Yet the unusual French-but-not-French Jewish doctor residing in Clos-Salembier undermines the stigma of his peculiarity through his unexpected humane treatment of non-French neighbors. On one occasion, he drives two Arab hitchhikers to their destination. The hospitable gesture amazes the riders to such an extent that they call him “brother.” The altruistic behavior of this “arabizarre” French person proves that anything is possible in Algeria—even miracles.\footnote{399}{Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 46-48; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 24-25.} For this reason, Cixous refers to her father as “just” or “saint”: the living “example” of hospitality, generosity, and fraternity that overcame racism.\footnote{400}{Calle-Gruber and Cixous, \textit{HCPR} 199; Cixous and Calle-Gruber, \textit{HCR} 197.} Upon the death of the father, however, the community forgets to return the favor to the surviving family. The mother and children face rejection by the so-called “community of [their] father’s friends.” Widowed at the age of thirty-six, the mother finds herself “quarantined for good” by her neighbors.\footnote{401}{Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 54-55; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 31.}

In turn, the hypocritical existence in “Algériefrançaise” provokes the narrator’s struggles and frustrations with living in Algeria. The high school that the narrator attends particularly typifies a system that nurtures an exclusivist mentality. Even the narrator’s
enrollment in the "Lycée" ("High school") in Algiers was due to a mistake. The school normally would have never admitted a Jew. She was accidentally allowed into this academic institution only on account of her father's death. Nonetheless, the error gives her the opportunity to observe the paradoxes that dictate the institution.\textsuperscript{402}

Within the walls of "Frenchalgeria" she witnesses the "madness" that reigns there. An enclosed timeless and miniature world, the high school resembles a "puppet theater." The allusion to "scène" in the book's title thus reinforces this puppet "stage" mentality of "Frenchalgeria." On the academic stage, everything runs in reverse, falling into "anachrony" where "tout est inversé en sens contraire, inversé et prétendu être dans l'autre sens" ("everything is inside-out, upside-down, and supposedly rightway up"). To give examples of this reversed, inversed, and pretend environment, the narrator explains that the "mad" people replaced the normal. The authority figures ruled the institution under the name of "contrevérité" ("[u]ntruth"). Individuals pledged to the spirit of anti-truth by believing in "what is not." The believers believed the beliefs claimed to be believed: "ce qui est dit est cru, on dit cru et on croit" ("what they say they say they believe, they say it's believed and believe it").\textsuperscript{403}

On top of this backward anachronous atmosphere, the school becomes a "Lycée in disguise" that the narrator futilely tries to escape. Destined to stay yet incapable of suicide, she resorts to changing her personality to the point where no one would recognize her. She learns to go to the disguised school, disguised. The practice consists of camouflaging, pretending, feigning, and masking the interior. This proves to be the

\textsuperscript{402} Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 142-43; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 80.

\textsuperscript{403} Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 143; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 80.
only way for her to face the absurdity and deception that ran the institution. By putting forth a “ghost” version of her true self, she makes herself “impregnable.” Thus she discovers that in order to survive the theater of puppets, she must join the others on stage and play her part.

Yet this act of camouflage eventually becomes ineffective in preserving the integrity of her identity. Her Jewishness always remained an obvious point of contestation for her non-Jewish classmates. Attending school with her childhood friend, Françoise, the narrator encounters the discriminating mentality within her classmate’s home. Even though Françoise could visit her Jewish friend, the French girl’s house forbade a reverse visit: “Jews are not allowed.” The knife of the “coupure radicale entre [leurs] maisons était l’antisémitisme” (“radical cut between [their] houses was anti-Semitism”).

Similar to the Jewish/non-Jewish separation, a divide existed between the native Algerians and French. When the narrator begins attending her school, she notices a clear distinction between the “malgérienne” territory of “malpropre,” (“dirtiness/improp[iet]y”) and the “propre” (“clean/proper”) French academic quarters. In order to maintain this binary, a process of erasure takes place within the institution. While the exterior of the academic building flaunted Moorish beauty and refinement, the interior underwent a “plan to erase the Algerian being.” Through a renovation that called

404 Cixous Les rêveries 147-49; Cixous, Reveries 83-84.
405 Calle-Gruber and Cixous, HCPR 207; Cixous and Calle-Gruber, HCR 204.
406 Cixous, Les rêveries 126-27; Cixous, Reveries 72.
407 Cixous, Les rêveries 122; Cixous, Reveries 70.
408 Cixous, Les rêveries 124; Cixous, Reveries 71. I add to Brahic’s translations of “malpropre” and “propre” in order to account for the relevant double meaning of the words.
for a total substitution at all levels, the “School for Girls” schooled non-Algerian, non-Moorish girls.\textsuperscript{409} Within the establishment, only France existed. Even the word Algeria appeared to be banned from the property.\textsuperscript{410}

Caught amidst the Jewish versus non-Jewish and French versus non-French divides, the narrator imagined herself as two entities living in one. She metaphorically illustrates this phenomenon by retelling her mother’s story about two doves and a rabbi. The mother had taken the two birds to the religious elder for sacrifice. As the Jewish teacher was preparing to kill one, the other takes off and escapes its fatal destiny. Upon seeing this, the rabbi exclaims that he must set the first one free as well. Doves must live and die together just as the sacred and the saintly remain inseparable.\textsuperscript{411} The narrator then projects herself into this anecdote by substituting herself in place of the birds. She thus communicates the disturbing experience of leaving Algeria in 1955. Barely freed from the grasp of killing hands, she resembles the second pigeon that flutters after the first, in search of the other half. Yet in her pursuit, she remains uncertain of whether she was following a path to life or to death. When she arrives in France, a chilling feeling of isolation and despair comes over her reminding her of what she had lost upon leaving Algeria: the “plumes qui protègent l’endroit de vie” (“feathers that protect the place of life”).\textsuperscript{412} Despite the distressing experiences of rejection and betrayal, the narrator

\textsuperscript{409} Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 123-24; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 70.

\textsuperscript{410} Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 150. The narrator refers to the unique occasion in which three Muslim women begin commuting the school as this chapter later indicates.

\textsuperscript{411} Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 141-42.

\textsuperscript{412} Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 157; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 89.
remembers the shelter, comfort, and life in her “unknown native land.” Moreover, the journey that she takes to join her other half brings her into a desolate “winter called France.” Thus her effort to recover a whole identity proves fruitless: “je cherchais partout où me trouver et en vain” (“I searched for myself and in vain”). She realizes that her missing half is not located in the winter called France. Instead she had simply abandoned her birthplace with its cherished memories.

Then, the images of a disoriented and dismembered identity culminate into a horrific scene that the narrator had helplessly watched in the streets of Oran. A terrible “accident” takes place before her, like a tragedy running its course on stage. Due to a girl’s trailing veil, she becomes tangled into the rotating machine of a mill and is violently pulled to her death. The unbelievable haunting sight brands the narrator’s conscience. From that day on, she carries this terrible scene within her. The terrifying event continues to replay in her mind to the point where she believes that she had witnessed her own death. The image of the severed body eerily characterizes her existence in Algeria: “j’ai l’existence coupée en deux” (“My existence has been cut in two”). From every angle of her life, she suffers a similar fate of finding her identity “cut in two.”

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413 Cixous, Les rêveries 167; Cixous, Reveries 95.

414 Cixous, Les rêveries 157; Cixous, Reveries 89.

415 Cixous, Les rêveries 145-46; Cixous, Reveries 81.
Becoming the River, Rebirth Identity⁴¹⁶

While rewriting the past can recall traumatic memories of dismembered identities, it can also strengthen a writer’s subjectivity. This subsection of the paper shows how Les rêveries demonstrates the reparative potency of remembering. Using a myopic, microscopic perceptiveness and a painterly approach to writing, Cixous transcends the borders of literary traditions, cultures, and viewpoints. With metaphors, wordplay, and neologisms, she transforms language in order to express otherwise indescribable realities. Experiencing a rebirth in the creative space of writing, she reveals the trajectory that women follow to escape the confining laws of convention. Crossing deserts, enflamed regions, and frozen landscapes, she finds the “right birth” in (and of) literature as she states in La venue.⁴¹⁷

The hopelessness and fragmentation that had marked Cixous’s childhood years in Algeria ironically stimulate a hopeful act of rewriting the past. An individual begins to write after suffering a critical loss. Once reaching the point of “losing everything, having once lost everything [. . .] Writing—begins, without you [. . .].”⁴¹⁸ As Cixous composes Les rêveries, however, she encounters dead ends that frustrate her efforts. Yet in her persistence, she initiates the “reparative process” of remembering.⁴¹⁹ When memories haunt the present, an individual evokes the past to “exorcis[e]” the lingering spirits: “[A]fin de les chasser, il faut les revivre à nouveau pour la dernière fois” (“[I]n order to

⁴¹⁶ This subsection draws on and develops the paper “Rewriting Memory, (Re)inventing Identity in Les rêveries de la femme sauvage” that I read at the UT Arlington Symposium Cultural Constructions II: Power and Memory in May 2007.

⁴¹⁷ Cixous et al. La venue 34; Cixous, “Coming” 28.

⁴¹⁸ Cixous et al. La venue 44; Cixous, “Coming” 38.

⁴¹⁹ Rye 142.
get rid of them, it is necessary to revive them again one last time”), explains Segarra in *Leur pesant de poudre*.420

As Cixous revisits the memories of a war-torn birthplace, she evicts her ghosts of Algeria. Yet re-conceiving the past requires a “collective effort.”421 The narrator of *Les rêveries* persistently knocks on all the doors of memory available to her—her own, her brother’s, and her mother’s—in order to knit together a “vital transfigure” of her Algerian childhood.422 Enduring (labor) pains of disappointments including closed doors and misplaced memoirs, she considers giving up. Yet by persevering, she discovers that “amour se trouve en [soi] sans se perdre” (“love [can] find itself in you without losing its way”).423 An “Urge,” a “joyful force” that dwells in an “inconceivable region” of her inner being, gives her the strength to carry the text to term.424 None of the losses from her childhood—misplaced pages, Oran, Algiers, a national identity—can trap her into despair. In the creative womb of writing, the internal strength, desire, and joy continue to renew the narrator’s hopes of remembering.

With revived motivation, the narrator initiates the recreation process: “when the pain of loss begins to ease, we can start the work of (re-)creating ‘an imaginative history’—of remembering and loving after our love has gone—and of re-building our inner world.”425 In rewriting the unwriteable, Cixous not only displays determination,

420 45.
421 Savona 95.
423 Cixous et al. *La venue* 45; Cixous, “*Coming*” 39.
424 Cixous et al *La venue* 45; Cixous, “*Coming*” 9-10
425 Rye 142.
but she also begins reinventing her subjectivity. Remembering “strengthens” the sense of self and triggers a “(re)invention of identities.”\textsuperscript{426} Les rêveries thus illustrates the rebirth of Cixous’s identity. She accomplishes through writing what painters like Baya strive to fulfill through art: “Le rêve d’un peintre: naître comme événement dans la naissance de son art. Seconde naissance, imaginaire; elle met en miroir la première naissance. Elle la complète, la développe comme un tableau ou comme une phrase.” (“The dream of a painter: to be born like an event in the birth of his art. A second birth, imaginary; it mirrors the first birth. It completes it, develops it like a painting or like a sentence.”)\textsuperscript{427} The art of writing induces Cixous’s “second birth” by “complet[ing]” and “develop[ing]” her first.

Yet the literary rebirth takes place only when the author has completely surrendered herself to writing, as Cixous proposes in La venue: “laisse-toi faire, laisse passer l’écriture, laisse-toi tremer; lessives, détends-toi, deviens le fleuve, lâche tout, ouvre, déboucle, lève les vannes, roule laisse-toi rouler [. . .]” (“let yourself go, let the writing flow, let yourself steep; bathe, relax, become the river, let everything go, open up, unwind, open the floodgates, let yourself roll [. . .]”).\textsuperscript{428} Cixous lets her subconscious guide her pen in the same way that Baya’s intuition dictates her brushstrokes. From the depths of her reveries, a country that she “did not know” emerges into view in the form of anecdotes, philosophical reflections, and flashbacks.\textsuperscript{429} Moreover, in the creative space

\textsuperscript{426} Segarra, Leur pesant 45.


\textsuperscript{428} 61; Cixous, “Coming” 56-67.

\textsuperscript{429} Cixous, Les rêveries 19; Cixous, Reveries 9.
of writing, Cixous discovers emancipation, self-affirmation, self-discovery, and the reinvented self: “[P]lus tu écris, plus tu échappes à la censure, plus la femme s’affirme, se découvre, et s’invente” (“the more that you write, the more you escape the censor, the more woman in you is affirmed, discovered, and invented”).

Cixous frees herself from the constraining censure of social and literary systems by transforming language into words that imitate the liberty of painting. She admits in “Le dernier tableau de Dieu” that she would like to write as a painter paints. Envying a painter’s ability to directly show what Cixous could only describe, she acknowledges her need for painting. She consequently aims her writing at painting: “J’écris en direction de la peinture. Je me tourne vers la lumière. Vers le soleil. Vers la peinture” (“I write in the direction of painting. I position myself toward the sun. Toward the light. Toward painting”).

In order to write toward painting in Les rêveries, Cixous uses metaphoric imagery, wordplay, and neologisms. With these literary techniques she molds language to convey artistically, experiences from her past. For example, Cixous even inlays multiple levels of poetic richness within the full title Les rêveries de la femme sauvage: scènes primitives. The heading cleverly brackets the central themes that permeate the text. An analysis of the two-part title reveals that each of the eight words contains multiple connotations. The term “rêveries” refer to the conscious act of mentally reliving the memories of past experiences. At the same time, “rêveries” also suggests a component of the subconscious

430 Cixous et al. La venue 60; Cixous, “Coming” 55.

431 Cixous 171.

432 Cixous, “Le dernier” 172-73; Cixous, “Coming” 106.
that projects fictive scenarios or images into a mind in slumber. Moreover, the concept of a “daydream” as a reaction of desire evokes an individual’s longing for the lost or inaccessible. *Les rêveries* illustrates these three notions of daydreaming as it pertains to the narrator’s obsession to “arriver un jour en Algérie” (“one day arriving in Algeria”).

Similarly, the expression “femme sauvage” (“woman of the wild”) signifies more than one concept. First, this female figure can represent the national icon of Algeria that Kateb Yacine develops in his writing. Kateb creates a metaphoric association between the character Nedjma and the land of Algeria in his play *La femme sauvage*. As Taïeb Sbouai explains, Kateb portrays lovers and fathers who try to claim their right to Nedjma, either through duels or by proving their paternity. Likewise, several nations and peoples have attempted for centuries to acquire Algeria as their own: a loved and desired land of the “femme sauvage.” Next, the narrator of Cixous’s *Les rêveries* also insinuates having an untamed nature, particularly through her identification with her childhood dog Fips. Calling to this pet as her “wild transfigure,” she sets up a parallel with the “wild” nature of her youth. Finally, given the proximity of the narrator’s home to the famous gorge in Algiers *Ravin de la femme sauvage*, she undoubtedly also refers to the name of the familiar landmark.

Then, the adjective “primitives” in the second part of the title alludes to the notion of “savage” as a primal existence. By portraying memories of the narrator’s birthplace,


434 Aresu 239.


436 Cixous, *Les rêveries* 73; Cixous, *Reveries* 42.
the adjective “primitives” makes a reference to the undeveloped years of childhood. The word suggests an organic or pristine condition of the original state of humans similar to what Rousseau believes to represent the initial happy years of human existence. Moreover, the adjective’s connotation of “wildness” underlines the homeless, vagrant situation of the narrator. In fact, Cixous makes a reference to her untamed and itinerant situation in La venue by claiming that she saw herself as “un animal, sauvage et crantif et [. . .] un animal féroce” (“a fearful and wild animal, and [. . .] ferocious”). Lacking a place to call “home,” she turns into a “femme sauvage.” Cixous thus plays with the multiple implications of “femme sauvage” that conjure up images of a childhood spent in an organic and impenetrable Algeria.

Likewise, the term “scène” (“scene/stage”) takes on plural significance. Experiences at the narrator’s high school remind her of a life acted out on “stage.” Aware of the “disguises” that take place in school and in the bourgeois lifestyle of Françoise, she envisions the entire academic system as a “Frenchalgeria” theater. Each member plays a part in the conspiracy of disguise. Then, in the moments where the narrator and her brother reminisce about Algeria, they appear to be watching “scenes” from a film of memories. The two siblings mentally replay a cinematographic account of incidents and landscapes from their birthplace. Venturing through the “empty Museum” and watching their “black and white” film of memories, they simultaneously become the directors and viewers of their personal cinema.

The multitude of meanings found in Les rêveries de la femme sauvage: scènes primitives thus gives the reader a foretaste of the stories that compose the narrator’s

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437 La venue 23; “Coming” 16.
childhood. At the same time, the significant versatility of the phrase exemplifies the type of wordplay that pervades the rest of the book. For example another instance of such carefully orchestrated word choice reappears in a passage where the narrator is describing the complications of remembering and the resistance that she encounters from those whom she solicits. By playing with a metaphor of doors, she conveys the notions of feeling shut out, guilty, and afraid:

Je n’aurais pas dû frapper à la porte, pensait-je, plus on frappe plus on a l’impression de porter des coups puis de porter des accusations, sur quoi l’on se sent coupable, insiste-t-on, les coups se retournent, on commence à spéculer on est frappé part toutes sortes de pensées suspectes et soupçonneuses, et cela ne fait pas céder la porte au contraire elle prend une importance et une valeur d’hostilité, de porte elle devient face, front, arrière pensée, encore un peu et elle va se mettre à parler, ce qu’elle va dire je ne le crains que trop, aussi ne vais-je pas ajouter à l’erreur de l’avoir martelée l’erreur de lui prêter des paroles absolument humiliantes.  

I oughtn’t have knocked on the door, I thought, the more one knocks the more one feels one is hitting someone then accusing them, about which one feels guilty, one insists, the blows turn around, one begins to speculate one is struck by all sorts of suspect and suspicious thoughts, which doesn’t force the door to open on the contrary it gathers in importance and hostility, it was a door it becomes a face, forehead, ulterior motive, another inch and she is going to blab, what she is going

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to say I am all to afraid of, therefore I will not add to the error of having harassed her with the error by putting absolutely humiliating words into her mouth.\footnote{Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 65.}

After the initial use of the terms “frapper” (“to knock”), “porte” (“door”), “coup” (“knocks/hits”), and “front,” she modifies their original meaning to communicate the evolution of her situation. The idea of “frapper”—“knocking” on a closed and exclusive door—shifts to the meaning of “frapper” (“to strike”) in how thoughts might “strike” an individual. Then, the noun “porte” changes into the verb “porter” in the sense of “delivering” “blows” (“coup”) or “making accusations” (“porter des accusations”). In turn, the word “coup” (“knock/hit”) reappears in the word “coupable” as an individual feeling “guilty” of “making accusations” through the gesture of “knocking.” When referring to “front,” the narrator evokes the notion of “forehead” yet also the sense of “pretense” and the “front” part of a home. Just as the exterior of a house or school building can have a misleading appearance, the narrator experiences circumstances of pretense and disguise. In the following paragraph, “porte” reappears in the form “portail” (“gate”) while the word “front” re-emerges to signify the “forehead” of a young girl pressed up against the “gate,” asking for food. The new scene now indicates the rampant misery that divided neighbors, friends, and even family members.

In addition to such puns, neologisms add originality to Cixous’s writing by fulfilling new functions in French vocabulary. She introduces terms such as “l’Algériefrançaise” (“Frenchalgeria”), “inséparable” (“inseparable”), and “Désalgérie” (“Des/DisAlgeria”), in order to portray accurately the conditions and events that she had witnessed in Algeria. While these innovative expressions reflect Cixous’s creativity, they
represent terminologies that best communicate her inexpressible or unspeakable experiences.\textsuperscript{440} Grafting together two or more words, Cixous invents neologisms that precisely articulate the complexity of situations, sentiments, and identities.

When the narrator refers to her high school as "Algériefrançaise," she indicates the supposed coexistence of two nationalities within the institution. Yet she also underlines the paradox of the title given the lack of Algeria inside the walls of the academic building. The notion of indivisibility that "Algériefrançaise" insinuates thus pertains to the stronghold of one nation upon the other. Related to the conflicting yet inseparable union, she introduces the idea of "inséparabe" ("inseparable"). Through this word, she alludes to the problematic circumstance of suffering from an intolerable relationship with her indefinable identity.\textsuperscript{441} On the one hand, Algeria, France, the Arab community, and the narrator’s Moroccan-Spanish-German-Slovakian Jewish heritage, all constitute aspects of her childhood subjectivity. On the other, the divisions, hostilities, and incompatibility between each component produce discord that leaves her feeling hopelessly irreconcilable. Despite the psychological turmoil that the narrator suffers, Marta Segarra also perceives an underlying sense of longing for Algeria. She interprets "Désalgérie" as expressing the narrator’s "desire" to know the inaccessible country: a "desire of Algeria."\textsuperscript{442} Yet given the overriding references to broken relationships, disguised identities, and exclusion, this term more appropriately illustrates the

\textsuperscript{440} Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 69, 45, 142; Cixous, \textit{Reveries} 39, 24, 80.

\textsuperscript{441} Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries} 45.

\textsuperscript{442} Segarra, "Hélène Cixous" 187. Translations of quotations from Segarra’s "Hélène Cixous" now and hereinafter are mine.
unattainable (dis-possessed) or lost (dis-connected): without algeria; dis-algeria; de-algeria. Accordingly, “Désalgérie” indicates the “despair” of never arriving in Algeria.

Cixous creates other words in order to highlight a key person or situation connected to memories of her birthplace. Instead of finding expressions that illustrate dual meaning, she fuses multiple words that emphasize the relevance of the individual or circumstance that she addresses. For example, “tonpère” (“yourfather”) and “tuterappelles” (“doyouremember”) become central to the stories or thoughts of the narrator’s mother and brother respectively. The coded reverence-reference to the absent father as “tonpère”—as opposed to “ton père”—underscores his importance. The mother uses this title as she retells the father’s lived experiences in the midst of the “Vichy-in-Oran” conflicts during WWII.\textsuperscript{443} Then, “tuterappelles” and its conjugative derivations appear in nostalgic conversations between the narrator and her brother. The chained words suggest the familiarity of this expression in the siblings’ verbal exchanges. They bounce the cemented phrase back and forth as they daydream about the subtle yet cherished details of the Algerian countryside.\textsuperscript{444}

In addition to these attached words, Cixous incorporates terms that blend together the two languages that had impacted her life. This takes place in the scene where the narrator’s brother furiously storms out of the house after seeing the “girl’s bike” that the mother had bought them. Seeing his reaction, the grandmother exclaims: “Solch ein Kukuck nochmal!” (“Such a Cuckoo again!”)\textsuperscript{445} Playing with the German word

\textsuperscript{443} Cixous, Les rêveries 61-62; Cixous, Reveries 35-37, 49.

\textsuperscript{444} Cixous, Les rêveries 85; Cixous, Reveries 49.

\textsuperscript{445} My translation.
“Kukuck,” Cixous invents the French-German words “Koukous” (for “cocious”), “kourons” (for “courons”), and “koukourons” (“cocious” + “courons”). The crossed languages yield familiar yet foreign hybrid words that disconcert the reader. At the same time, the terms expose the author’s witty sense of humor. Moreover, the intermixing languages indicate Cixous’s bilingual upbringing. Given that the maternal grandmother—speaking almost no French—came from Germany to live with the family, Cixous grew up in a Germanophone setting. Then, as Cixous’s language of education, French represents the literary language that subsequently brought her to Paris: “[c]est la langue française qui m’a conduite à Paris” (“It was the French language that brought me to Paris”).

Other forms of poetic wordplay—rhyme, alliteration, and repetition—add to the lyricism of the book. This becomes particularly evident in the passage where the narrator expresses compassion for her brother concerning the Bike. Understanding the utter humiliation he had felt upon receiving a “girl’s bike” from his mother, the narrator considers herself her brother’s “sole witness.” Taking the expression “seul témoin” (“Le seul witness”), she transforms it into a series of other words that eventually yield the affectionate phrase, “sœur’aime mais non moins” (“sisterlovesyou but not less”).

[...] le seul témoin. Le seul témoin ? Non. La seule témoine ? La sœurtémoin la sœur t’aime mais non moins, il faudra bien que la langue me porte où je veux nous trouver. Car toute cette histoire nous aura été fête et défaite parce qu’il était

446 Cixous, Les rêveries 31-32. Instead of Brahic’s translation I use mine in order to keep the play between German and French.

447 Calle-Gruber and Cixous, HCP 206; Calle-Gruber and Cixous, HCR 204.

448 Instead of Brahic’s translation I use mine to stay closer to the original sense of Cixous’s expression.
mon frère de sœur et de main et moi sa sœur de tête et de cœur. Sans les
inquiétudes que j'avais sur son sort et les siennes sur ma fatalité l'un de nous
serait mort en quelque sorte.449

[...] sole witness. *Le* sole witness? No. *La* sole witness? The soul sister and
witness and loving nonetheless, I pray the language will take me where I want us
to go. For all this was done to surprise us and then undone because he was my
brother of sister hand-in-hand and I was the sister of his heart and mind. Without
my worries about how he'd end up and his about what might happen to me one of
us would be dead more or less.450

As if to expose the motivation behind her poetic language, she explains that her words
need to communicate where she hopes to find the brother-sister relationship. She reaches
the desired level of verbal creativity by reshaping expressions and also by playing with
the phonetics of words. For example, the recurrent rhyme emphasizes the narrator's
sympathy for her sibling. In addition to the expression “sœur et de main” (“sister hand-
in-hand”) that rhymes with “seul témoin” (“*Le* sole witness”), coupled rhyme also exists
between “fête” (“surprise”) and “défaite” (“ undone”), and between “sœur” (“sister”) and
“cœur” (“heart”). Then, a triple rhyme follows in “sort,” “mort,” and (partially in)
“sorte.” Alliteration also converges with rhyme to further underline the narrator's dear
relationship with her brother. Within a short passage, she includes “sans,” “sur,” “son,”
“sort,” “siennes,” “sur,” “serait,” and “sorte.” The profusion of “s”s leaves an
unforgettable linguistic impression on the reader. Her language takes her where she


450 Cixous, *Reveries* 12.
wants the two of them to go by imaginatively describing her supportive and ever-present role as a sister.\footnote{451}

This dense poetic language in prose also resurfaces in a section of the book that compares Paris to cities of Algeria. Listing the qualifying characteristics of a “City,” the narrator describes Oran and Clos-Salember through a literary collage of images and expressions. Choosing and arranging words to produce rhyme and rhythm, she emphasizes the impact that the war-infested Algerian cities had made on her memory: “Ville a d’ailleurs toujours signifié pour moi cent portes Ville assiégée assiégante clos camp retranché barbelés enceinte Clos-Salember niche enclave captivité sorties troie oran alger sang homme et sang femme sans moi” (“City moreover has always meant to me one hundred doors besieged besieging City enclosure entrenched camp barbed wire pregnant\footnote{452} Clos-Salember niche enclave captivity exits troy oran algiers man blood and woman blood without me”). Using the words “cent” (“hundred”), “assiégée” (“beseiged”), “assiégante” (“beseiging”), “enceinte” (“pregnant”), “Salember,” “sorties” (“exits”), “sang” (“blood”), and “sans” (“without”), she again uses alliteration to make a phonetic impact in the passage. In the following lines, the rhyme and homophony among the words “cent” (“hundred”), “sang” (“blood”), and “sans” (“without”) weave lyricism into the long sentence. Then, the phrase “alors que Paris non, Paris est sans portes et donc sans forces opposées sans supplications sans assaut sans cheval sans chien et je ne le vis pas Ville” (“whereas Paris no, Paris is doorless and therefore without opposing forces without pleading without assault without horse without dog and City I do

\footnote{451} Cixous, Les rêveries 26; Cixous, Reveries 12.

\footnote{452} I am translating “enceinte” that Brahic chose not translate.
not live it as”), the abundant repetition of “sans” underlines the contrast that the narrator perceives between the cities: unlike Clos-Salemberier, Algiers, and Oran, Paris lacked the doors, opposing forces, pleas, assaults, horses, and dogs necessary to qualify as a City.  

Cixous further embroiders her text with poetry by marking the narrative with staggered anaphora. By repeating sections of the sentence with which she opens the book—“Tout le temps où je vivais en Algérie je rêvais d’arriver un jour en Algérie [ . . . ]” (“The whole time I was living in Algeria I dreamed of one day arriving in Algeria [ . . . ]”)—she highlights its thematic significance: the seemingly impossible dream of arriving. The leitmotif statement reappears on several occasions in fragmented or modified form. For example, in a small isolated paragraph a third of the way through the text, Cixous inserts the comment: “Je recommençais depuis le début, tout le temps où je vivais en Algérie, j’essayais quand-même” (“I started again from the beginning, the whole time that I was living in Algeria, I still tried-all-the-same”). This fragmented sentence reveals the narrator’s persistent yet hindered efforts to recover her memories of Algeria. It underlines the challenges of reviving an oblivious mind.

Again rephrasing “Tout le temps où je vivais en Algérie je rêvais d’arriver un jour en Algérie [ . . . ],” she illustrates other circumstances in which she had faced similar impeded arrivals. In order to convey the complicated relationship that existed between the narrator and her nanny Aïcha, she states: “Tout le temps du Clos-Salemberier j’ai rêvé d’aller un jour chez Aïcha dans son chez” (“The whole time of the Clos-Salemberier I

453 Cixous, Les rêveries 49; Cixous, Reveries 26; emphasis added.

454 Cixous, Les rêveries 9; Cixous, Reveries 3.

455 Cixous, Les rêveries 48; Cixous, Reveries 26.
dreamed of going to Aïcha’s house one day”). The substitutions of new locations, verbs, and tenses into the original sentence suggest both the desire and taboo of knowing Aïcha’s private existence. Entering the personal life of this woman represents a psychological equivalent to having access to Algeria. Yet like the prohibition of incest, a barred intimacy separates the child from the caretaker. The narrator’s limited association with her nanny thus echoes the same forbidden rapport that she had with her birthplace.

Another version of “je rêvais d’arriver un jour en Algérie [. . .]” appears with a new tense and verb just prior to the section of the book in which the mother shares her stories of working as a mid-wife. Playing with an imagery linked to the mother’s profession, the narrator contemplates: “[. . .] je rêve d’entrer dans le pays dont je suis l’avorton entêté” (“[. . .] I dream of entering into the country of which I am the stubborn abortion”). She envisions herself as an aborted yet obstinate fetus seeking to find its way back into the womb of her “mother”-land. The string of anaphora then terminates at the end of the book. The narrator secures the loose ends of the repeated phrases by closing the narrative with the original sentence “Tout le temps où je vivais en Algérie je rêvais d’arriver un jour en Algérie” (“The whole time that I was living in Algeria I would dream of one day arriving in Algeria”). With this conclusive gesture, she establishes an overarching motif that adds refinement and poetic harmony to the entire work.

Through creative words and expressions, Cixous gives birth to painterly writing and a new identity. At the same time, she demonstrates a feminine trajectory of finding

456 Cixous, Les rêveries 92; Cixous, Reveries 53.

457 Cixous, Les rêveries 96; Cixous, Reveries 55.

458 Cixous, Les rêveries 168; Cixous, Reveries 96.
the "second birth" in literature just as Baya does in painting. She evokes the strenuous journey that women make before finding their "right birth." Yet Cixous finds reassurance in knowing that women possess extraordinary resilience inside. Directly witnessing multiple births at the mother's Clinic, Cixous observes and admires the extraordinary "puissance et les ressources de la féminité" ("power and the resources of femininity"). The innate strength of women inspires Cixous's writing. Similarly, the vitality and ingenuity of Cixous's texts encourage other women to "create their own individual speculative versions—of Promethea—of a liberated, newly-born woman of themselves." The mutually reinforcing visceral power of women helps them to arrive at the "right birth" of their new self.

Tasting the "milky taste of ink" with which women nourish and encourage one another, Cixous notices these and other parallels between mothering and writing. She accordingly composes several texts containing metaphoric images that mirror the "mothering" experience of a writer. Les rêveries incorporates a particularly striking metaphor that links the experience of giving birth to writing. The passage at the opening of the book describing the narrator's encounter with the Comer illustrates this notion:

[. . .] j'avais noté les premières lignes que le Venant me dictait, remplissant dans le noir la grande page d'une précipitation de ces phrases inestimables, levain du

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459 Cixous et al. La venue 34; Cixous, "Coming" 28.

460 Cixous et al. La venue 37; Cixous, "Coming" 31.

461 Rye 174.

462 Cixous et al. La venue 34; Cixous, "Coming" 28.

463 Cixous et al. La venue 37; Cixous, "Coming" 31. Despite the maternal imagery that Cixous uses to explain the process of (re)writing, she acknowledges that this incident takes place regardless of gender. Women and men authors alike resemble mother figures who "give birth to all kinds of persons and effects of identification" (Cixous, "Difficult Joys" 24, 29).
livre, don des dieux dont je ne connais même pas le nom. Puis une fois reçu le viatique absolu je m'aventurai à allumer, et comme si j'avais à la bouche, à la bouche de l'âme et de la main, et sur ma langue de nuit l'hostie qui répand chair et sang du Venant dans mon corps, tout en suçant et absorbant, j'avais écrit à la suite de la première semence quatre grandes pages de lignes serrées en caractères épais hâtifs [...].

[... ] I had noted the first lines that the Comer dictated to me, hastily covering a good-sized page with the priceless sentences, yeast of the book, gift of gods whose names I don't even know. Once the absolute viaticum had been received I ventured to switch on the light, and as though I held the Host to disperse the Comer's flesh and blood through my body in my mouth, in my soul's mouth and my hand's, and on my night tongue, as I let it dissolve, in the trace of that initial seeding, I had scrawled four big, single-spaced pages [...].

The different stages of writing insinuated in the passage resemble the steps of an obstetric delivery. After producing the principal ideas and memories—a moment that symbolizes the "crowning" of the text—the rest would come naturally. "[J]e n'ai plus qu'à pousser plus loin, ce commencement une fois donnée, il n'y a plus qu'à poursuivre dans la direction, il faut travailler de toutes ses forces, certes, mais l'essentiel est là, le reste est possible et ne demande qu'un extraordinaire rappel des énergies" ("I have only to forge ahead, once I've been given the beginning, I have only to press on, you have to work with

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464 Cixous, Les rêveries 10.

465 Cixous, Reveries 3.

466 The is the medical terminology used to refer to the moment when the fetal head presents itself.
all your might, naturally, but the essential is there”). The intense final mental pushes would expulse the rest of the body of her baby-text from her womb-memory. The episode resembles the narrator’s mother’s description of an “expulsion” birth and thus reinforces the birthing-writing parallel. Moreover the resulting four and-a-half pages take life: “vivantes charnues, puissantes drues, d’une générosité exaltante” (“fleshed-out, powerful dense, full of stirring generosity”). If writing represents the birth of thoughts from her subconscious, then the resulting “vivantes charnues” pages signify the newborn life. Finally, the narrator’s ecstatic joy of seeing the freshly written text resembles the emotional climax of a parent who glimpses her child for the first time.

As the narrator later discovers, this marvelous event also has its dreadful opposite: the loss of the child-text. When she realizes that she had misplaced the five pages, she reacts as a mother who learns of the sudden death of her infant. In her mourning, she temporarily abandons trying to recall her memories of Algeria. After a forty-year interim, she finally attempts to rewrite the past. This second delivery, while not as unexpected as the first, is equally dramatic. Striving for intentional and truthful writing, she inflicts psychological violence upon herself as she performs her own mental C-section. Yet she faces up to “everything that [she] d[oes]n’t take time or d[oes]n’t have the courage to deal with in ordinary life.”

467 Cixous, Les rêveries 10; Cixous, Reveries 4.

468 Cixous, Les rêveries 59; The narrator’s mother claims that in this type of birth, once the head comes out, the rest follows automatically.

469 Cixous, Les rêveries 10; Reveries 3.

With the help of Cixous's self-operation, she produces a text that reinvents an "imaginative history" and "rebuild[s] an inner world."\textsuperscript{471} In fact, the cyclic narrative of \textit{Les rêveries} reveals the "work of the unconscious, implicit in all efforts of anamnesis, of the summoning of memory necessary in autobiographical writing."\textsuperscript{472} Remembering and daydreaming about the past, the narrator conveys the "work of the unconscious"—the "inner world"—by sharing her wandering yet circling reveries. A link even exists between dreaming and writing in the way that both activities can have a truth-seeking focus. Cixous attests that in order to write truthfully, one must "write as [one] dream[s]" because "at night we don't lie." The "dreams" would teach writers "shamelessly" and "fearlessly" to confront "what is inside every human being." While revealing the hideous aspects of humanity, this form of writing also induces "invention" and "poetry" consequently producing "great poets."\textsuperscript{473} Honesty, courage, and innovation define Cixous's \textit{Les rêveries} and illustrate how the author takes writing to another level in order to overcome falsehoods, fears, and the mediocrity of convention.

\textbf{At the Summit}

Autobiographical writing therefore requires a degree of vulnerability that exposes an intimate self. As \textit{Les rêveries} carries out the C-section, the book unveils the realm of

\textsuperscript{471} Rye 142.

\textsuperscript{472} Segarra, "Hélène Cixous" 192.

\textsuperscript{473} Cixous, "Difficult Joys" 22. Although this paper will not cover the subject of dreams in depth, recent texts by Cixous, including \textit{Rêve, je te dis} and \textit{Hyperrêve}, indicate her interest in dreams from a Freudian perspective.
the subconscious that evokes Jean-Joseph Goux's concept of transpective awareness.\(^{474}\) Moreover, Cixous elicits reveries by drawing on a transpective vision that signifies more than the hidden inner world. She demonstrates an ability to see transpectively by crossing gender dichotomies, distinct perspectives, and cultural mindsets. When critics describe Cixous as an author who transcends set genres of writing, they recognize a transpective viewpoint that diverges from Goux's definition of the term. Likewise, Segarra describes Cixous as an "écrivain inclassable ou 'indécidable'" ("unclassifiable or 'undecided' writer") in order to underline the transpersonal and transcultural qualities of the author's works. Consequently, Cixous's texts represent a "displaced word" that stands "outside of all set definition with regard to literary genres."\(^{475}\)

This section will explore how Cixous's *Les rêveries* evokes multiple versions of transpectivity. The plural voices that compose the narrative indicate a transpective position that crosses perspectives: the narrator's, the brother's, and the mother's. Linked to the incorporation of variable viewpoints, the narrator also offers insight from a standpoint that tries to penetrate cultural phenomena, objects, and the metaphoric significance of Fip's story. With her several levels of transpection, she perceives hidden details and symbolic realities that delineate her family's experiences of Algeria. Thus transcending the scars of her childhood memories, she discovers reconciliation in literature that finally brings her home.

Cixous attains her transpective vision through the love of writing and by being loved by writing. As she explains in *La venue*, a "Third Body, a third view" takes form

\(^{474}\) In *Oedipe*, Goux defines a "transpective" position as awareness of the unconscious self that Oedipus exemplifies (133-34, 198).

\(^{475}\) Segarra, "Hélène Cixous" 185.
though this textual intimacy. This Third Body “vole et va voir plus haut le sommet des choses et au sommet s’enlève en direction des plus hautes choses” (“flies up to see the summit of things, and at the summit rises toward the highest things”). Ascending to the highest point, this new being sees things from a more global perspective. Writing thus insinuates “voler” (“to steal/to fly”) and offers Cixous the transceptive position from which she encompasses a more complete picture.

One way that Les rêveries exemplifies a transceptive third view is by crossing the gender boundary. For example, even as a sister, the narrator empathizes with circumstances that concern her brother’s masculinity. She suffers the disappointment of her sibling regarding the “girl’s bike.” By stating “Je suis malheureuse. Je suis malheureux. Je suis mon frère de l’autre côté,” she unites emotionally with her brother (“I am miserable [feminine]. I am miserable [masculine]. I am my brother on the other side”). As one and both, she experiences unhappiness doubly. Likewise, she refers to their relationship as fraternal: “nous sommes frères jurés originaires, côté à côté” (“we are original sworn brothers, shoulder to shoulder”). While still recognizing herself as the “sister,” she also sits at either side of her brother: on one side as a “sister of a brother” and on the other as an “extra brother.”

Other instances exist in which the narrator presents or identifies a blurred feminine-masculine dichotomy. For example, after the brother begins riding the “girl’s bike,” it begins appearing “more virile” while still remaining feminine. In turn, the

476 Cixous et al. La venue 58; Cixous, “Coming” 54.

477 Cixous, Les rêveries 36; Cixous, Reveries 18.

478 Cixous, Les rêveries 20-21; Cixous, Reveries 10.

479 Cixous, Les rêveries 51; Cixous, Reveries 29.
narrator’s predominantly female household revolves around an “undercurrent virility.” Even with the presence of three women—the grandmother, the mother, and the daughter—the family chooses efficiency over femininity: “femme on ne fait pas ça au lieu de femme on fait vite” (“we don’t do woman, we do quickly, to compensate”). Rather, an “incessante turbulence née nebuleuse algérienne sexuelle” (“incessant nebulous Algerian sexual turbulence”) obscures the gender dichotomy in their home.

Factors that contributed to the “incessant Algerian nebulous sexual turbulence” include the mother’s insensitivity to maintaining sexual distinctions. Blaming the “girl’s bike” on the mother’s “maternal incompetence,” the son claims that she had castrated him unintentionally: “[M]aman n’a même pas voulu me castrer. Toute sa vie elle n’a même pas perçu l’homme, ni le fils, ni la femme, ni la mère” (“Mummy did not even want to castrate me. Her whole life she took no notice of the man, nor the son, nor the woman, nor the mother”). Failing to recognize his masculinity, her ignorance had ultimately committed the crime. Nonetheless, her son “was dying of pain” from psychological castration.

Other ways in which the book manifests a transceptive quality is by intermingling time periods and using a plural narrative voice. While these techniques are not unique to Cixous’s writing, they bypass the traditional singular perspective and chronology of autobiographical texts. The a-chronology of the dialogues and events challenges the conventional timeline expected of a personal history. In turn, the interweaving stories

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480 Cixous, Les rêveries 91; Cixous, Reveries 52. This notion of not “making” or “doing” woman suggests de Beauvoir’s famous assertion regarding how woman learns to play her gendered role instead of being born into it.

481 Cixous, Les rêveries 24; Cixous, Reveries 12.

482 Cixous, Les rêveries 37; Cixous, Reveries 18-19.
include conversations of the narrator, brother, and mother, and thus multiply the text’s viewpoint. The narration consequently commits a “transgression des modèles canoniques, entre autres par la fragmentation ou l’éclatement du point de vue unique de l’autobiographie” (“transgression of canonic models, among others by the fragmentation or breaking of the singular point of view of the autobiography”).

As Les rêveries recounts the past, some sections reveal a more current time frame. For example, the brother reminisces with the narrator about their former years in Algeria. Contemplating and evaluating their childhood from the present, he states “Tu n’as pas connu l’Algérie” (“You didn’t know Algeria”) or “Tuterappelles” (“Doyouremember”). Then, in other instances, his comments on the narrator’s book in progress reveal his proximity to the writing process taking place. In particular, he shares his discomfort with the images of violence, conflict, and hatred that the sister blatantly presents in the book. He insists, “[j]e ne retrouve pas dans ce livre le parfum tellurique de l’Algérie” (“I don’t get the fragrance of the Algerian soil”). On a different occasion, he helps the narrator brainstorm ideas for the book’s title: “Je te suggère d’appeler ce livre le Paradis Perdu [. . .]” (“I suggest that you call this book the Lost Paradise [. . .]”). Unconvinced by the relevance of his suggestion, narrator proposes a compromise: “hell of paradise.” The siblings’ dialogues thus illuminate the events occurring behind the “scenes” in the writing of the book.

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483 Segarra, “Hélène Cixous” 186.
484 Cixous, Les rêveries 19, 85; Cixous, Reveries 9, 49.
485 Cixous, Les rêveries 83; Cixous, Reveries 47-48.
486 Cixous, Les rêveries 121; Cixous, Reveries 69.
Alongside the brother’s adult voice, the narrator also adds his remarks as a boy from the past. For example, she includes his exasperated exclamations when he received the “girl’s bike” from his mother: “elle m’a offensé! Elle m’a encore tué!” (“she insulted me! She’s killed me again!”). The narrator even incorporates a phrase that she mishears her brother say: “je me fais chien pour être gentil, elle me répond par un crochet ou peut-être un cachet” (“I do my utmost to be nice, she gives me a stick or maybe a spritz”). By also mentioning the original sentence “Je me fais chier pour être gentil toute une année! Elle me répond par un crachat!” (“I’m f____ing nice the whole year! And she spits on me!”), the narrator collapses the two time periods. On the one hand it represents the brother’s childhood statement. On the other, it becomes the adult voice that is correcting the misheard version.

The narrator then inserts a third narrative voice: the mother’s. After the premature death of the father, the widow becomes the only figurative door on which the narrator can knock in hopes to re-enter the city of Algiers. Like an eager nursing infant, the daughter prods her mother’s memory in order to elicit anecdotes that could fill in the mental gaps. She continues anxiously to pound on the parent’s mental door: “Le cœur battant j’insiste je guette encore aujourd’hui peut-être une porte s’ouvrirait dans la Ville d’Alger si à la mémoire de ma mère je frappe assez fort [. . .]” (“Heart pounding I don’t give up even today I keep watch perhaps a door will open in the City of Algiers if I rap hard enough at my mother’s memory [. . .]”). In response, the mother attempts to
recall what she had observed while in Algeria. As the narrator listens to the stories, she recovers the missing details of the various events that took place in Oran and Algiers. The mother thus becomes an umbilical cord to the past that feeds the narrator's famished memory.

Among the mother's accounts of Algeria, the central ones consist of sharing her experiences as the wife of a physician, a mid-wife, and a mother. She lived out these roles fighting the discrimination that she had faced for her Jewish heritage, her widowhood, and her non-Arab status in Algeria. For example, when "Vichy-in-Oran" forbade the father from practicing as a doctor, the wife suggested the possibility of working in his place: "moi on ne peut pas m'interdire de soigner puisque je ne suis pas médecin" ("they can't stop me from treating people since I'm not a doctor"). The father thus teaches his spouse how to do injections and indirectly continues to care for his patients. Then, after the husband's passing, the surviving widow pursues the profession of a mid-wife. Yet even with this occupation, she faces exclusion. When the narrator asks the mother if she had ever been invited over to the homes of her patients, the parent initially rebuffs the absurdity of the question. She then replies "on n'invitait pas les sages-femmes," ("people didn't invite mid-wives"), as if the title of "sage-femme"—rather than her widowed Jewish status—had banned her from their homes.

The mother similarly discloses her experiences as a parent. In particular, she redeems her side of the story regarding the "girl's bike." Although she eventually

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490 Cixous gives this name to the Nazi regime in Oran.


understands the son’s anger about her purchase, she also justifies her action. She explains that as a single mother, “en vérité c’était mon esprit d’économie [. . .] il suffit que ça roule [. . .]” (“in truth it was my sense of economy [. . .] all it had to do was roll [. . .]”).493 Trying her best to provide for the family with limited finances, she chose to buy the “girl’s bike.” In order to further underline the mother’s good intentions, the narrator includes the fact that “[elle] ne l’[a] même pas acheté en solde!”494 Without waiting for a sale, the parent had paid for the item that she hoped would fulfill the dream of her children. By intermixing multiple voices and periods of time, Les rêveries subsequently undermines the canonized model of the “singular perspective” characteristic of autobiographies. And as Cixous breaks convention, she encompasses the diversity of her family’s stories.

Another dimension of Cixous’s transpectivity originates from her “myopia.” Her nearsightedness endows her with the ability to discern the minute or obscure details of reality that others might overlook. Observing life in great proximity, she claims: “Je suis quelqu’un qui regarde les choses de très très près. Vues par mes yeux, les petites choses sont très grandes. Les détails sont mes royaumes [. . .] Tel est le bénéfice de ma myopie” (“I am someone who looks at things from very, very close up. Seen through my eyes, little things are very big. Details are my kingdoms [. . .] Such are the benefits of my nearsightedness”).495

493 Cixous, Les rêveries 37; Cixous, Reveries 19.
494 Cixous, Les rêveries 36.
495 Cixous, “Le dernier” 177; Cixous, “Coming” 109.
With her microscopic acuity, Cixous erects magnificent kingdoms of details. Her “myopia” helps her to capture close-ups of realities in Algeria that might appear invisible to those around her. Just as an artist who sees the world through a new set of eyes, she discovers her capacity to perceive circumstances from a different angle. Through her writing, she portrays what “the French do not see.” Particularly sensitive to the notion of “malgérienne,” the narrator speaks of scars on her “marked body” that originate from her ability to re-imagine the hardships that she had experienced while residing in Clos-Salembier: incidents of “hatred,” “victimization,” and “racism.” 496 The narrator purposely gathers visions of “truth” that she had witnessed in this “malgérienne” existence in order to later reveal the truth that the French had failed to notice. 497

Among the invisible realities that the narrator remarks, she also identifies memorable emblems that summarize her story of Algeria: the “gate” of her home and the life (and destiny) of Fips. 498 During the pre-Algerian War period, the narrator recalls the rejection that her family had faced particularly after the death of her father. Finding the source of this discrimination in the prevalent attitude of “antiwidowism,” she remembers how all the neighbors, without exception, “mirent [sa] mère et la famille à la porte préventivement” (“gave my mother and the family a cold shoulder, as a preventive measure”). 499

With respect to this incident, the gate in front of their house represents a barrier that serves to “séparéunir” (“separunit[el]”). Literally, this divider separated the family

496 Savona 100.
497 Cixous, Les rêveries 111; Cixous, Reveries 64.
498 Cixous et al. La venue 58; Cixous, “Coming” 54.
499 Cixous, Les rêveries 43; Cixous, Reveries 22.
from the antagonism of the exterior community while simultaneously uniting the household. Both a symbol of separation and of unification, the gate becomes a “résumé de [sa] Désalgérie” (“epitome of [her] Des/DisAlgeria”). The Bike, the “Frenchalgeria” high school, the sentiment of “inséparable” all revolve around the “séparer-unir” metaphor. The Bike infatuation initially brings the two siblings together in their common interest and hope of using it to explore Algeria. Yet the “girl’s bike” becomes a point of separation that dismantles the brother-sister bond. In turn, the narrator’s high school represents “Frenchalgeria” where the Moorish decorative exterior of the academic building gives the impression of intercultural harmony. Ironically, the interior of the school proves to be significantly devoid of any Algerian presence or name. Likewise due to the Jewish background of the narrator and her family, friendships turn out to be conditional. Although Françoise would come to visit the narrator, the reverse would was taboo due to anti-Semitic discrimination. Then, when in the presence of French or Arab circles, the narrator becomes painfully aware of her “inséparable” identity. One moment considered “exultation arms” and the next “hope and wound,” she remains forever exterior to both cultural communities. The conflicting “separating-uniting” scenarios exemplified by the “gate” contribute to the aforementioned condition of “Désalgérie”: the desire, despair, and dispossession of Algeria.

The narrator’s transceptive intuition also reveals how Fips plays a central role in portraying her memories of Algeria. Although the other family members believe differently, she envisions the dog as the “transfigure” of the household. Moreover, she

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places herself in the position of the dog to discern his thoughts about his hopeless existence. By situating Fips's "monologue" in the center of the book, the narrator underlines the symbolic importance of the speech:

Me voici donc seul sur la terre, n'ayant plus de frère, de sœur, de père prochain, d'ami de société que ma solitude. Le plus sociable et le plus aimant des êtres est proscrit d'un accord unanime. Je suis dans cette position de cage comme dans un rêve et je ne dors plus jamais. Et moi, détaché d'eux et attaché au fil de fer, que suis-je moi-même?\textsuperscript{502}

Here I am alone on the earth, having no more brother, sister, no father nearby, no friend only my solitude for company. The most sociable and loving of beings is unanimously outlawed. I am caged as in a dream and I don't sleep anymore.

And I, detached from them and tied to a strand of wire, what am I?\textsuperscript{503}

Empathizing with Fips, the narrator understands his wretched and isolated situation. Moreover, she recognized how much his loneliness also depicted the circumstance of the family. Like the dog, the entire family was trapped in a cage, powerless to change their circumstance. The question with which the dog's tirade ends "what am I?" reflects the thoughts of the narrator and of other victims who found themselves in similar situations during the Algerian War. An elaboration of Fips's question that would suggest the utter humiliation of his condition would be: "What am I . . . that I might deserve this?" No human or creature deserves to be reduced to such a status. Unable to answer this cry for justice, the narrator can only watch the chaotic frenzy of the land of "enchainés, cette

\textsuperscript{502} Cixous, \textit{Les rêveries 77}.

\textsuperscript{503} Cixous, \textit{Reveries 44}.
chaîne d’enchaînements, ce déchaînement d’enchaînés qui à leur tour enchaînent” (“chained-up creatures, that chain of chainings-up, the unleashing of the chained-up who in their turn start chaining”). Cruelty and madness dictated the never-ending “chain” of events of individuals imprisoning one another. Consequently, Fips acts as the symbol of the family’s suffering and of all people who had fallen victim to the hatred and injustice that had stricken the nation-in-revolution.

While transpsectively perceiving the troubling conditions of the childhood spent in Algeria, the narrator eventually finds resolution through the rewriting process. Rather than finding herself condemned to a perpetual state of “dispossession,” she eventually witnesses an arrival. Talking to her brother and to other childhood friends, she retrospectively examines their circumstance. In hindsight, she comes to understand that the terrible incidents and nostalgic details both equally comprise her Algeria.

Khatibi’s “mémoire en devenir” (“memory in the process of becoming”) and Alcoff’s reference to identity as a “process” explain how the narrator might embrace both the wretched and desired recollections of her childhood as constituting her present identity. With the perpetual change that memory and subjectivity undergo, she can stop fearing the past as a state of entrapment. She accordingly experiences a composed spirit of acceptance by finally feeling “chez [soi]” (“home”) in Clos-Salembier: “[...] j’y suis chez moi maintenant que je n’y suis plus enchaînée [...] le Clos-Salembier est en moi et je tiens à chacun des endroits que j’ai fuis et chaque instant détesté détestable est pour

504 Cixous, *Les rêveries*, 77; Cixous, *Reveries*, 44.

505 “Croisement” 23.

506 315.
moi une transfigure vitale que je n’échangerai pour aucun instant doux et modéré du monde” (“[...] I am at home there now I am no longer chained up [...] the Clos-Salembier has become a part of me and I am attached to each of the places I fled and each hated hateful moments is for me a vital transfigure that I wouldn’t exchange for any kinder gentler moment in the world”). No longer chained or confined to the sites and scenarios of the past, the narrator could finally start feeling at home in her childhood city. Just as the poststructural concepts of “play” and “emergent” subjectivity explain the liberation that Baya finds in painting, these notions similarly illustrate how Cixous discovers the freedom to accept the past. Clos-Salembier, which has become part of the narrator, contains all of the invaluable transfigures that she would never exchange for any other sweet moment in the world. In order to emphasize this sense of closure, she ends the book with the phrase “je rêvais d’arriver un jour en Algérie” (“I dreamed of one day arriving in Algeria”). The last sentence reminds the reader of the complicated journey on which the narrator had set out and simultaneously indicates its completion. The written book represents the narrator’s arrival in Algeria.

Afflicted with loss from several angles, Cixous’s ambition to rewrite the past in Les rêveries proves to be a challenge. The journey requires a revisiting of the hardships of misplaced memoirs, death, wars, and rejection that she had suffered while residing in an inaccessible Algeria. En route to the past, the narrator relives the fragmenting

507 Cixous, Les rêveries 167; Cixous, Reveries 95.

508 Cixous, Les rêveries 168; Cixous, Reveries 96.
sociocultural and sociopolitical tensions that leave her with a broken identity. In order to illustrate the dismembering forces that reigned within the nation, Cixous includes recurring themes of physical and psychological barriers, bodies cut in two, and severed relationships. Yet instead of succumbing to this dismembered aborted condition, Cixous persistently searches for the “right birth.” Wandering between the states of Memory and Oblivion, she re-members her fragmented past and severed identity. The errant work of the unconscious constitutes the “rêveries” that she narrates. Moreover, by incorporating the voices of multiple family members, she indicates the collective effort of re-membering their “Paradise Lost/hell of paradise.”

While the anecdotes of the narrator’s brother and mother offer the framework to rebuild the past, her fictional elaborations and symbolic imageries help knit together the living body of Algeria, one figurative organ at a time.

The act of re-membering a dismantled history and subjectivity resembles undergoing complicated birthing and healing processes. Cixous must persevere through the labor pains as she seeks her rebirth in literature. By writing truthfully in Les rêveries, she recovers both nostalgic dreams and haunting nightmares. Although the book does not offer a “fragrance of the Algerian soil,” the text turns into a poetic work of art. Using wordplay, alliteration, rhyme, and neologisms, the author gives flight to language and writes in the direction of painting.

In addition to incorporating such innovative language, Cixous provides a transpective perspective of her birthplace that renders her writing “unclassifiable.”

Combining the accounts of multiple first-person narratives, she breaks away from the

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509 Cixous, Les rêveries 121; Cixous, Reveries 69.
510 Segarra, “Hélène Cixous” 185-86.
singular perspective expected of autobiographic writing. With her myopic insight, she sees beyond the marionette stages, gender boundaries, and cultural divisions. Moreover, from her new transpective viewpoint, she finally “arrives” in Algeria.

Conveying a sense of closure in the last pages of *Les rêveries*, the narrator indicates the “right birth” that she delivers from the womb of creative writing. Through the reparative act of rewriting the past, she reclaims not only her birthplace, but also her identity. With a reconciled birth nation and subjectivity, she dispels the former fear of disorientation and dispossession. And just as *Les rêveries* illustrates the narrator’s homecoming success, Cixous discovers a new nationality in writing: a “nationalité imaginaire qui est la nationalité littéraire” (“imaginary nationality which is literary nationality”).511

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511 Calle-Gruber and Cixous, *HCPR* 207; Cixous and Calle-Gruber, *HCR* 204.
-- Chapter Three --

Hélé Béji
Mais quand elles se penchent sur leurs dossiers et les remuent, c’est avec mille fois moins de science et d’art que ne tourne ma grand-mère sa vieille cuillère dans la saveur de l’existence.\textsuperscript{512}

But when they lean over their folders and fidget with them, it’s with a thousand times less science and arts than what my grandmother stirs into the flavor of existence with her old wooden spoon.\textsuperscript{513}

--Hélé Béji

An engaged intellectual, a citizen of Tunisia, and a gifted writer, Hélé Béji makes her greatest contribution to literature as a social critic from her transcultural Tunisian-French position.\textsuperscript{514} In her critical essays *Desenchantement national, L’imposture culturelle (L’imposture)*, and most recently *Une force qui demeure (Une force)*, she unveils and addresses crises afflicting Tunisians since their Independence from France in 1956. Trying to discern the problems that her country faces at both the individual and national levels, she particularly notes an atmosphere of disorientation and displacement. A study of the above three texts reveals how she approaches the sociopolitical issues. She considers her nation’s problems from a transceptive viewpoint that comparatively investigates her country’s circumstance by crossing generational and cultural boundaries. While Béji, like Cixous, voices her transcultural viewpoint on the social conditions of her birthplace, she offers a more evaluative standpoint that differs from *Les rêveries*’ focus: a work that seeks to expose realities rather than analyze them. Moreover, Béji’s circumstance as a “décolonisée” distinguishes her from Cixous’s. Although the former


\textsuperscript{513} Translations of quotations from Béji’s *L’œil* now and hereinafter are mine. The words “remuent” and “saveur” also translate as “mix” and “purpose,” respectively, thus revealing the play that Béji may have intended.

\textsuperscript{514} Béji has taught as a Professor of Literature at the Université de Tunis, worked internationally for UNESCO, and currently presides the literary society: *College international de Tunis*. 
struggles to make sense of her decolonized independence, the latter seeks deliverance from the ultimate marginalization that she had faced in Algeria due to her Jewish-French label. These distinct conditions thus explain the divergent motivations of the two writers.

A native of a decolonized country in the process of trying to recover its national and cultural identities, Béji perceives a nation of lost people. In *L'imposture*, she examines the reconstructed “cultural” environment of Tunisia and finds it “si déroutante par le multiple jeu de ses effets, de ses objets, de ses signes, que seule l'acuité d'un regard surhumain pourrait pénétrer sans s'égarder” (“so confusing with the multi-faceted play of its effects, its objects, its signs, that only the sharpness of a superhuman gaze could penetrate [it] without being misled”). Amidst all of the “effects,” “objects,” and “signs” that dominate her society, she believes that humanity disappears. Instead of finding her identity within the cultural icons, she experiences an “incompatibility” or an “exile” in a foreign homeland.515

Believing that her sentiment of displacement also applies to her fellow citizens, she scrutinizes her personal circumstance in order pinpoint the source of her nation’s social crises. Although she considers herself a “décolonisée,” she feels limited in her understanding of her situation. Subsequently, she re-imagines how her culture might look if Tunisia had never suffered decolonization: “Sans la décolonisation, la culture d’aujourd’hui ne serait pas ce qu’elle est, elle n’aurait pas vécu la crise identitaire avec une telle intensité, l’archaïque ne serait pas révélé comme le fond d’être de l’homme moderne, figure déracinée dans le temps et écartelée dans l’espace” (“Without decolonization, the culture today would not be what it is, it would not have experienced

the identity crisis with such intensity, *the archaic* would not be revealed as being the core of the modern human man, a figure uprooted in time and dismembered in space"). Without the disruptions of colonialism and decolonialism, natives of Tunisia would not be enduring such an intense identity crisis. Yet the modern individual would also never have known that antiquity represents the foundation of humanity. Nevertheless, Béji questions how a decolonized person can re-establish a sense of subjectivity within a modernizing country trying to make sense of its collective identity.

If Baya finds a solution to the question of belonging in art, Béji seeks answers in her cultural origins. *L’œil du jour* (*L’œil*) is a semi-autobiographical novel that illustrates Béji’s attempt to rediscover her origins. Returning to the grandmother’s house where she had spent her childhood, she uncovers the foundational elements of her cultural upbringing that allow her to rebuild her present day sense of identity. Moreover, she re-evaluates her Tunisian tradition, heritage, and culture. By giving renewed value to the elements that compose yesterday’s Tunisia, she attempts to restore modern day humanity. As Béji observes the problematic realities of her society, she therefore also strives to resolve these dilemmas. Unlike Cixous’s *Les rêveries*, *L’œil* accordingly adds a sociologist’s vision of the circumstances of Béji’s birthplace.

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517 Béji distinguishes between the definitions of “civilization” and “culture.” The former represents the “fécondité d’un être historique ayant dépassé le souci de son identité, et prenant la liberté de se tourner vers le monde” (“fecundity of a historical being having surpassed the concern of his identity, and taking the liberty to turn himself toward the world”). Thus while civilization appears less concerned with identity and more with its propagation within the world, culture represents a “geste de redéfinition de soi-même où la différence se perçoit comme le principal ferment de création de l’esprit” (“gesture of self-redefinition where the difference appears as the main ferment of the creation of the mind”; Béji, *L’imposture* 39). In *L’œil du jour*, Béji illustrates the distinction that she observes between the Occidental world of civilization (Paris) and the Oriental home of her culture (Tunis).
While acting as a sociocultural critic, Béji writes with creative intuition that critics claim to be comparable to the aesthetics of Proustian novels.518 L'œil demonstrates poetic sensitivity through metaphoric descriptions that redefine persons, traditions, and visual details such as color. Béji’s L’art contre la culture: Nûba (Nûba) gives some background to her artistic approach to writing. In this essay, Béji tries to comprehend the power of “Nûba”: traditional folkloric music typical of several North African countries including Tunisia.519 Her analysis reveals that imagination and creativity have played and will continue to play an important role for humankind. By recognizing the archaic origins of art, she re-emphasizes the inherent tie between antiquity and modernity.520

In Nûba, Béji also seeks to define art's function. Based on her observations of the Noubian musical performance, she concludes that art tries to “faire apparaître, dans toute sa signification et sa puissance [...] cet instant déferlant de la beauté” ("to reveal, in all its significance and power [...] this breaking instant of beauty").521 Béji thus underlines her need to capture the powerful instant of beauty as a literary artist. Beauty manifests itself in “les choses mêmes, dans la nature vitale des êtres, dans les images de la nature, dans les moments de paix, dans les reflets éphémères, dans la sensation du mystère, dans la lumière, dans l’ombre, dans les combinaisons les plus impersonnelles du hasard”

518 Béji’s descriptive writing in L’œil reminds critics like Sonia Lee and Marta Segarra of Proust’s narrative style (Lee 230; Segarra, “Retrouver” 191).

519 “Nûba” (also spelled “nouba”) is Andalusian music that dates back to the thirteenth century in Tunisia and still exists in North Africa today. Consisting of multiple pieces of instrumental and vocal music, it allows for a series of different "nouba[s]" or "turns" by musicians and singer (Benidir 80; Guettat 214).


521 Béji, Nûba 31. Translations of quotations from Béji’s Nûba now and hereinafter are mine.
("things, in the vital nature of beings, in the images of nature, in the moments of peace, in the ephemeral reflections, in the feeling of mystery, in the light, in the shadow, in the most impersonal combinations of hazard").\textsuperscript{522} As a literary artist, Béji thus seeks to reproduce the splendor of the moment, of sensations, and of spontaneity. In \textit{L'œil}, she accordingly models a form of writing that breathes, bounds, dreams, discovers, creates,\textsuperscript{523} and acts as another "bird-catcher of instants."\textsuperscript{524}

Like in Cixous's \textit{Les rêveries de la femme sauvage} (\textit{Les rêveries}), the narrative of \textit{L'œil} consists of wandering description of a multitude of moments that gives the work an errant quality. In fact, the book ends with a metaphoric illustration that conveys the nomadic movement of the text: "[. . .] je me laissai transporter, comme un chat souple qui bondit de terrasse en terrasse, rayonnant et léger, sur le tapis magique du retour" ("[. . .] I let myself be transported, like a limber cat who leaps from terrace to terrace, radiant and light, on the magic carpet of return").\textsuperscript{525} The storyline follows the path of a roaming cat, meandering through the daydreams of the narrator's imagination. She revisits the past, circling around nostalgic images of her homeland, Tunisia. The narrator's gaze weaves around the feet of her grandmother, lingers within the walls of her childhood home, and springs outside into the city streets of Tunis. Pausing to consider the overlooked details of interior furnishings or the fading paint on the walls lining a squalid neighborhood, she gives new significance to commonplace items and scenes much the way that Baya's brushstrokes depict a new image of Algerian women, nature, and sceneries.

\textsuperscript{522} Béji, \textit{Nūba} 31-32.

\textsuperscript{523} Béji, \textit{Nūba} 28.

\textsuperscript{524} Cixous, "Le dernier" 171.

\textsuperscript{525} Hélé Béji, \textit{L'œil du jour} (Tunis: Cérès, 1993) 253. Translations of quotations from Béji's \textit{L'œil} now and hereinafter are mine.
Principally focusing on the lifestyle of the grandmother, *L’œil* notably exposes Béji’s concern for the condition of women in Tunisia. Although the text offers some commentary on the social conditions of women, Béji more thoroughly confronts the matter in *Une force*. In both works, she underscores the deep interconnection that exists between traditional and modern Tunisian women. Despite the tendency of modernist feminists to reject the traditions of their female ancestors, Béji insists that traditional women have always possessed significant power and influence within the domestic sphere. Rather than stereotyping women of antiquity as illiterate and incapable, she emphasizes the “resistance” and “intelligence” that they have possessed within the heart of tradition.526 This understanding in turn explains the thematic motivations of *L’œil* and the reverent depictions of the grandmother. By pushing a feminist debate that defends both tradition and women’s emancipation, she diverges from and even opposes Cixous’s feminist stance from the 1970s.

Drawing on the informative details that *L'imposture*, *Nūba*, and *Une force* provide about Béji’s background and sociocultural perspectives, this chapter will analyze the contributions that she makes as a literary artist and critic. The study will show how she assumes a transpective perspective that transcends cultural, generational, and gender constructs and boundaries. With remarkable perceptiveness and originality, she makes insightful sociocultural and aesthetic re-evaluations of Tunisian life. At the same time, she re-values the dying Tunisian heritage that her contemporary society has overlooked for the sake of modernization. Both in the home of the grandmother and in the streets of Tunis, she discerns the markers of a cultural foundation that her people have relinquished.

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With an artistic eye, she also re-evaluates the beauty of both domestic and urban settings. Through metaphoric imagery and elaborate aesthetic details, she redefines the significance of color, blends dichotomies, and introduces a new system of symbolism. As the final subsection of this chapter will demonstrate, L’œil also makes a strong yet abbreviated critique against Tunisian modernist feminists. Continuing the feminist issue in Une force, Béji asserts that the extreme modernist position has endangered her nation’s humanity and well-being. She writes that in order to prevent the collapse of society, women must move toward an alternative feminism that secures their future existence on the unshakable foundation of antiquity.

Cultural Markers in the Dusk of Tradition

Concerned with how the evolving modern lifestyle of Tunisians has provoked the deterioration of an already fragile heritage, Béji incorporates her reflections into semi-fictional works. This subsection will examine accordingly the central motifs of L’œil and show how they function to signal the larger phenomenon of Tunisia’s disappearing past. Temporality becomes a predominant recurring theme that characterizes the novel. In turn, the errant and fragmented narrative conveys not only the unpredictable nature of memory, but also the attenuated condition of the narrator’s written memoirs. L’œil portrays the principal cultural markers of the narrator’s birthplace through the home, the grandmother, and the city life of Tunis. These three integral components of Tunisian heritage constitute the core of the nation’s humanity. Yet through the depiction of fleeting
childhood memories, an aging grandparent, and a deteriorating hometown, the narrator also alludes to the country's dying tradition.

Just as the leitmotif of loss pervades the creative works of Baya and Cixous, it also becomes a central focus in L'œil. Béji's text revolves around the narrator's fading memories of Tunis and of her beloved grandmother. In one scene, the narrator speaks of the last day of her visit in Tunis. She dreads the premonitions of the soon-to-be-faded memories of her hometown. Even prior to her departure, she feels disconnected from the scenes of everyday life that had formerly been so familiar to her. The "dear and sweet space" would soon diminish into a "strange transient or unaccomplished vision." Curiously, this foresight of the process of forgetting also reveals the hindsight that she had gained from her former departures. As she ponders her return to Paris, she grieves Tunis—the architecture, the housemaids of her home, and their daily activities—knowing that her memories would gradually disintegrate. Her childhood surroundings will dissolve into oblivion within the memory-obliterating realm of her "nostalgia." Like a flock of migrating birds that thins out as the overly fatigued winged travelers drop from the sky, the narrator's "emaciated impressions" of her birthplace will transform into something "inedible, denatured, limp." Lacking the density of the original fresh images, the lingering traces would regress into detached, unsubstantial husks.527

Recognizing the eroding effect of time on memory, the protagonist fights oblivion in order to salvage the fragmented remains of the past much like the narrator of Les rêveries. Mentally grabbing every image, sound, and feeling that lingers, the former character stores the mental snapshots for her to "consume" later. Yet even these

“souvenirs” appear rushed and useless for future savoring: “Everything is too mobile, blurry, fleeting.” The narrator metaphorically illustrates her melancholy by comparing her circumstance to children who feel hungry just as the dishes have come off of the table to be put away. Hoarding the dried leftovers, they mull over the great feast that they had just missed. Likewise, in place of a neatly ordered and meaningful memory album, the narrator finds a jumble of “débris d’images comme ces morceaux de faïence cassée dont on tapissait quelquefois, puisqu’ils coûtent moins cher, les allées d’un jardin, le fond d’une buanderie [. . .]” (“debris of images like pieces of broken earthenware with which one sometimes covers, because it costs less, the alleys of a garden, the floor of a laundry room [. . .]”).528 Just as these ceramic shards act as a substitute for more substantial building materials, the narrator’s hastily salvaged yet limited memories of Tunis function as a provisional mental record that she hopes might sustain her until the next visit back. If Les rêveries consists of an a-chronological collection of impressions, metaphoric symbols, and anecdotes of a distant childhood, L’œil contains sinuous and disjointed descriptions, reflections, and assessments of a forgotten birthplace that suggest the arabesque design in Baya’s pictures.

L’œil’s narrator reinforces the disconnection that she feels within her homeland by sharing other disconcerting experiences. In one scene, she arrives at the Tunis airport and notices an “infirmité qui [la] dépossédait de l’adhésion, de la profondeur” (“infirmity that dispossessed her of membership, of depth”). The troubling state of dispossession mirrors the same sentiment that the narrator of Les rêveries had experienced during her childhood years in Algeria. Although the narrator of L’œil has physically returned to her birthplace, she strangely perceives illusory images of her hometown that compete with

528 Béji, L’œil 96-98.
the actual ones. The discrepancy between the city that she remembers and the indigestible reality that she sees unsettles her. Trying to mentally picture the city of her youth, she visualizes a “ville remontée des profondeurs du souvenir comme un scaphandre alourdi d’eau, dans la distance vague, paresseuse, ensommeillée, nimbée par le coup de pinceau d’un amateur qui laisse passer la vérité, l’essence, la profondeur lumineuse” (“city pulled up from the depths of memory like scuba gear weighed down by water, in the vague distance, lazy, sleepy, enshrouded by the brushstroke of an amateur who overlooks the truth, the essence, the luminous depth”).

Next to her vague recollection of Tunis, the city that she now perceives appears false. The narrator squints at a “semblant de paysage qui dansait devant [ses] yeux un peu mous, incrédules” (“illusion of landscape that danced in front of [her] somewhat lax, disbelieving eyes”).

Like the sentiment of disconnection that predominates in Tunis, the narrative of *L’œil* lacks clear coherence. It takes an indirect route through and among the spaces and images of the narrator’s reflections of her childhood. The thoughts and visions of an aimless mind pilots the journey of remembering. *L’œil’s* winding descriptions thus resemble the errant narration of *Les rêveries*. Moreover, just as Cixous’s text closes with the narrator dreamily re-imagining her past, Béji’s book ends with the narrator reminiscing about her childhood. Her reveries resemble those of an individual who dreams of events that took place over the course of the day. Listening to the city of Tunis

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530 This circumstance reflects the same notion of “displacement” that Béji develops in *L’imposture*. Like the narrator in *L’œil*, the writer senses the same incongruity between what she remembers from her past and what she recently observes within her nation. Instead of finding a “refuge” within the “vie culturelle” (“cultural life”), she wonders if the modernizing “culture” might be erasing the “image même de [son] humanité” (“the very image of her humanity”; Béji, *L’imposture* 16-17).
preparing for the night, the narrator drifts off into her nostalgic dream world like a bounding stray cat or a "magic carpet of return."\textsuperscript{531}

At the same time, just as Cixous's book evokes a cyclic process of remembering, the narrative flow of \textit{L'œil} vaguely follows the curve of the sun's arc from dawn to dusk. For example, \textit{L'œil} opens in the morning just as the narrator is waking. The scene shows the narrator struggling against the suffocating force of Boutellis as she tries to get up. The invisible yet debilitating entity paralyzes her entire body making her waking efforts futile.\textsuperscript{532} To continue emphasizing the image of daybreak, the first two chapters contain words like "optimism" and the verb "open" to figuratively allude to the notion of "dawn."\textsuperscript{533} Then, the body of \textit{L'œil} consists of an unstructured collection of the narrator's experiences, observations, and descriptions that reveal the everyday life of the grandmother and the city of Tunis. In the last five chapters of the novel, the narrator progressively makes references to "evening," the "end of the day," "nightfall," and "night's tide."\textsuperscript{534} The scenes of dusk and allusions to the approaching night thus suggest the day’s end. The digressive yet arc-like narrative of \textit{L'œil} thus succeeds in illustrating both the unpredictable dynamics of memory and the routine movements of the sun.

Amidst the erratic yet time-conscious narration, the book maintains a thematic focus that specifies the cultural markers of Tunisian society: the grandmother, her private domestic existence, and the public city life of Tunis. By dedicating a significant portion of the narrative to the former two themes, the narrator stresses their importance. In fact, a

\textsuperscript{531} Béji, \textit{L'œil} 194.

\textsuperscript{532} More details surrounding this scene of Boutellis will appear later in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{533} Béji, \textit{L'œil} 26.

\textsuperscript{534} Béji, \textit{L'œil} 126, 142, 159, 186.
remarkable interconnection exists between the person and the place: by assuming a
highly influential position in managing the daily domestic life, the grandmother
incarnates the space of her residence. The narrator moreover shares her deep admiration
of and fascination with the grandmother’s spirituality and restorative influence on the
household. And as this subsection will illustrate, the grandparent and her abode
ultimately symbolize the icons of tradition from antiquity.

In Une force, Béji elaborates on the notion of the grandmother as the prototype of
Tunisian heritage. By watching her grandparent, she could observe how her life reflects
the “millennium history” of “mythological times.” Through daily interactions with the
grandmother as she performs her traditional activities, Béji appreciates the “privilege” of
experiencing the domestic lifestyle and immersing herself into the mentality and customs
passed on since antiquity.\textsuperscript{535} Although Béji never needs to partake in the domestic
work\textsuperscript{536} as a child, she “adorai[t] regarder [sa] grand-mère tourner sa cuillère en bois dans
la marmite, et inventer de ses doigts la formule de ses épices” (“loved to watch [her]
grandmother stir her wooden spoon in the stew and invent the formula of her spices with
her fingers”).\textsuperscript{537} Through the gesture of cooking, this woman elicits an ancient tradition
that reaches back into the countless generations that precede her.

Both in the life of Béji and in the narrative of L’œil, the grandmother becomes a
link to the cultural past by acting as a keeper of culture. Even the wardrobe of this
elderly woman becomes an extension of her presence. The intriguing piece of furniture

\textsuperscript{535} Béji, Une force 91.

\textsuperscript{536} Une force 41.

\textsuperscript{537} Béji, Une force 47.
contains countless spaces where the grandmother can store various everyday objects that she rescues from abandonment. The compartments assure a safe keeping of each article regardless of its monetary value or condition. Each randomly collected item thus takes on the quality of an “eternal figurine” despite its modest function.\(^{538}\) Devotedly caring for every piece of her collection, the grandmother offers a sense of permanence to these cultural objects. As the caretaker of a wardrobe that gives an “eternal” quality to the trinkets stored within, the grandmother symbolizes the source and protector of culture for the granddaughter. Just as the owner of the wardrobe possesses the keys to all of its compartments, she also acts as the guardian of the narrator’s heritage. The protagonist thus seeks to rediscover the culture that she had known as a child by examining and scrutinizing her grandmother’s existence.

While the grandmother represents the keeper of culture, the sheltering privacy of her home also becomes a cultural space of refuge and comfort. When stepping across the threshold into the grandmother’s home, the narrator rediscovers the joy of familiar faces.\(^{539}\) By contrasting the welcoming atmosphere of the “home” to the misery of the city streets, the narrator further indicates the sheltering quality of the grandmother’s universe. She recalls the therapeutic effect of returning home as a child: “Toute la fatigue du dehors, la laideur et l’abandon de la ville, les mensonges, les platitudes, tout ce que j’avais pu entendre, l’état nébuleux de mes pensées, tout glissait hors de moi” (“All the fatigue of the outside, the ugliness and the abandon of the city, the lies, the platitudes, all

\(^{538}\) Béji, L’œil 15.

\(^{539}\) Béji, L’œil 41, 77.
that I had been able to hear, the nebulous state of my thoughts, all slid out of me”).\textsuperscript{540}

While the dull mediocrities of urban life drained her energy, the grandmother’s residence contained the restorative and welcoming qualities of a sanctuary.

Through this portrayal of the grandmother’s dwelling, Béji makes a statement about the private domestic sphere. The home contains a powerful force that purges the burdensome disappointments of the exterior world. Moreover, “this domestic life, exclusively feminine,” reflects a “lost paradise” as Segarra indicates.\textsuperscript{541} Far from suggesting oppressive confinement that hegemonic feminists might assume of traditional Muslim homes, the space of this Tunisian dwelling proves different. The domestic territory becomes the preferred “refuge”\textsuperscript{542} within which the grandmother feels “content.”\textsuperscript{543} Although the narrator never adopts the domestic life of her grandmother, she recognizes the “power of contemplation” within the home’s private sphere.\textsuperscript{544}

Béji’s commentaries in Une force further elaborate on L’œil’s depiction of the home as a transgenerational zone of protection. In the former text, she alludes to Vermeer’s depiction of the interior of a kitchen in the painting The Milkmaid. The artwork seems to capture a “glorified” image of the kitchen of her childhood residence. The Dutch painter introduces an “arrière-cuisine oubliée, soudain baignée de gloire”

\textsuperscript{540}Béji, L’œil 77.

\textsuperscript{541}Marta Segarra, “Retrouver le temps perdu: L’œil du jour de Hélé Béji,” Leur pesant en poudre: romancières francophones du Maghreb (Paris: L’harmattan, 1997) 195. Translations of quotations from Segarra’s “Retrouver” now and hereinafter are mine.

\textsuperscript{542}Segarra, “Retrouver” 193; Béji, Une force 62.

\textsuperscript{543}Marc Brosseau and Leila Ayari, “Chapter 11: Writing Place and Gender in Novels by Tunisian Women,” Geographies of Muslim Women: Gender, Religion and Space, eds. Ghazi-Walid Falah and Caroline Nagel (New York: Guilford Press, 2005) 291.

\textsuperscript{544}Segarra, “Retrouver” 195; Béji, L’œil 103.
("forgotten back-kitchen, suddenly bathed in glory"). He had managed to seize the "reality" of Béji’s Tunisian home and the "greatness" of the domestic world often lost in the extreme "familiarity" of daily life. Béji insists that the "charm of an interior world" signifies an irrereplaceable place for humanity. Without this shelter, life would become unbearable for any human being. Women and men would lose the "energy of [their] humanity" in the absence of a home: "L’absence de la demeure est l’exil du présent; la présence de la demeure est l’abri du futur!" ("The absence of the home is the exile of the present; the presence of the home is the shelter of the future!")

By focusing on women’s traditional domestic setting as presented in Vermeer’s seventeenth-century work, Béji identifies an ageless significance of the "place of her protected childhood." The painter’s "archaic gestures" somehow managed to capture the scene and the "interior truth" of Béji’s twentieth-century home. He succeeds in transforming the "scènes les plus terre à terre, les plus prosaïques de la féminité" ("most common scenes, the most mundane [scenes] of femininity") into newer versions: ones that have become "picturales et dignes d’être contemplées, d’être admirées" ("pictorial and worthy of being contemplated, being admired"). Béji thus admires the timeless and borderless reality of the feminine space that Vermeer gloriously portrays in his painting: "[. . .] Vermeer, en peignant non seulement son univers, mais, sans le savoir, le mien, l’exaltait par la rencontre soudaine de sa vérité, de sa généralité" ("[. . .] Vermeer, "

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545 Béji, *Une force* 64-65.


547 Béji, *Une force* 145.

548 Béji, *Une force* 65.
in painting not only his universe, but without knowing it, mine also, exalted it through this sudden encounter with his truth, his generality").

While Vermeer preserves the universe of the narrator’s grandmother and childhood home—the foundations of traditional and cultural life—the mortality of the grandparent symbolically parallels Tunisia’s vanishing heritage. On the one hand, the family member suggests a notion of timeless constancy in the eyes of the granddaughter. On the other, the increased deafness and decreased mobility of the beloved elderly woman betrays her impermanence. L’œil’s narrator portrays her as static and mobile, immortal and mortal, and representative of both dawn and dusk. Likewise she metaphorically becomes as “transparency and tiling,” “terrestrial shadow and porch light,” and “old age and dawn,” and later as “young”/”old,” “light”/”dark,” and “life”/”death.” Fluctuating between two opposing positions, the grandmother’s nature appears changeable. The narrator’s observations thus indicate a growing awareness of the fading body and world of this revered figure. The terms “tiling,” “shadow,” “old age,” “old,” “dark,” and “death” literally and figuratively point to the earthly or mortal image of the grandmother. At one point, the narrator even laments how this aging woman seems to “marche au bord de la tombe sans crispation ni crainte” (“walk along the tomb without tension or fear”).

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549 Béji, Une force 66.


551 Béji, L’œil 169.

552 The concept of the grandmother as an archetype of the traditional woman of Tunisia becomes a focus of analysis later in this chapter.

553 Béji, L’œil 169.
Just as the narrator wearily watches senescence challenge the grandmother’s vitality, she regrets how time and neglect have dismantled the structures of deserted homes. Like the waning presence of the grandparent, the image of her vanishing heritage also disconcerts her. Peering at the remains of the vacated dwellings, she feels like a lonely orphan anxiously awaiting the “venue de parents qui n’apparaîtront jamais” (“coming of parents who will never appear”). The former occupants and their stories will be left forever unknown. Under the “cruel armory of solitude,” the forgotten ruins have mutated into a foreign space that gives an “expression étrange de vieux miroirs vénitiens où l’on ne se regarde plus” (“strange expression of old Venetian mirrors that are no longer used”). Similar to a wild unexplored territory, the “abysmal forces” take over these “deserted houses.” Only residual elements partially attest the “arrested beauty” that negligence and time have halted. This play between decrepitude and resilient beauty create “illusions of the past.”\(^{554}\) On the one hand, some features of the ancient homes have survived through time in order to communicate the city’s cultural history. On the other, the overall attrition of the dwellings reveals the indifference of the contemporary society toward their tradition and history.

The references to the architectural remnants and to the sentiment of orphanhood moreover inform Béji’s commentary about Tunisian society in *L’imposture*. She claims that Tunisians live as “orphans” in their homeland where their patriarchal national history remains unknown. As decolonized individuals, they have lost a figurative father: their national history: “Orphelin d’histoire, le décolonisé retrouvait dans sa culture la consolation d’une mère” (“An orphan to history, the decolonized [individual] found

\(^{554}\) Béji, *L’œil* 74-75.
maternal consolation within culture”). Like the empty neglected houses in L’œil, the people of Tunisia have lost their ties to their past. They consequently seek the “maternal consolation” within culture. Yet just as Baya compensated for her lost parents by painting scenes of maternal embrace and lush gardens, L’œil tries to meet the needs of the decolonized orphans by reminding them of the ancient cultural traditions preserved within the grandmother and the home.

The Re-(e)valu(at)ing “Œil”

The narrator of L’œil redeems the nation’s lost history by salvaging a devalued tradition. Through a metaphoric re-evaluation of culture, she gives new value to the cultural markers of the grandmother, the home, and the city of Tunis. This subsection will analyze how the narrator functions as an “œil” (“eye”) that carefully identifies the hidden characteristics of everyday life in Tunis. For example, it will show how the grandmother symbolically represents the “œil du jour” (“eye of day”)—the sun—within the home. As the key figure of the private domestic sphere, she manages the household just as the sun sustains the solar system. Acting as a conscientious collector of cultural objects and also as the moral, spiritual, and material provider of the household, she incarnates Tunisian culture and determines the functionality of family life. In turn, just as the grandmother treats even the most useless items in her collection with devoted care, the narrator’s eye re-evaluates commonplace details and scenes of Tunis. By

555 Béji, L’imposture 35.

556 Although Béji never gives a definite interpretation of the ambiguous title “œil du jour” (“eye of day”), I consider it as an allusion to the “eye” in the daytime sky: the sun.
bringing attention to the deserted ruins of her hometown, she gives new value to a
forgotten national culture. Béji thus attempts to preserve the cultural foundations of her
nation and restore the lost identity of decolonized orphans of history. In the process, she
uncovers aesthetic details of urban existence and gives an artist’s rendition of Tunis that
approaches Cixous’s technique of writing-painting.

*L’œil* offers an intricate “painting” of metaphoric and artistic depictions of the
grandmother and her residence.\(^{557}\) These two components of the narrator’s childhood
symbolically define her past. In fact, the title *L’œil du jour* acts as a coded phrase that
highlights the important themes of “eye” and “day” that pervade the book. Given that the
storyline generally follows the proceedings of a day—from the rising to the setting of the
sun—a strong association also exists between “eye” and “sun.” Moreover, the “eye of
day” motif frames a narrative that continues to play with symbolic imagery that revolves
around the sun, day, and light. The imagery of the sun thus forms a triangular
relationship with the grandmother and with Tunis. On the one hand, the sun and
grandparent become metaphorically identical given the central roles that they play in the
home and solar system respectively. On the other, the fictional text loosely structures the
narrated scenes of Tunis over the period of a day.

The principal metaphoric association that emerges from the book concerns how
the grandmother’s life in the home mirrors the role of the sun in the solar system. In fact,
at one point, the narrator shares a curious detail that associates the person to the sun.
During the broadcasting of the daily weather report on T.V, the grandparent expresses a
devoted interest in knowing the forecast. She eagerly looks for the “solar figure” that she

calls “eye of the sun.” Even though sunny weather generally prevails in Tunis, the grandmother expresses heartfelt gratitude and relief every time she sees the symbol of the sun.\footnote{558}{Béji, L'œil 147.} Her reaction not only shows a strong affinity for the sun, but also begins to set up her symbolic parallel to it.

Linked to the “eye of day” metaphor, the grandmother models constancy just as the sun faithfully casts light onto the earth. The narrator designates the grandparent as a dependable nurturing force. In contrast to the latter’s image of immovability, the former resembles a transient individual who travels between Tunis and Paris. Yet when she returns to the grandmother’s home, she redisCOVERs a sense of restoration just as the earth would benefit from the light and warmth of the sun. Regarding the fixed and redemptive characteristics of the grandmother, Denise Brahimi underlines the impression of stability that this family member gives. Although the world might continuously evolve, this foundational figure remains (or is expected to remain) unchanged: “On aime au contraire que la grand-mère n’ait pas changé, alors que tout bougeait autour d’elle, y compris nous-mêmes” ("One prefers on the contrary that the grandmother did not change, while everything moved around her, including ourselves").\footnote{559}{Translations of quotations from Brahimi’s Maghrébines now and hereinafter are mine.} Just as the earth circles around the seemingly un-aging sun, modernity revolves around the grandmother who remains oblivious to the changes of society.\footnote{560}{Denise Brahimi, Maghrébines: Portraits littéraires (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1995) 36-37.}

An icon of both the domestic sphere and the narrator’s childhood, the grandparent therefore takes on a statue-like timeless and symbolic quality. Representing the human
emblem of the home, she provides a sense of constancy and protection for the narrator. The eternal quality that this particular family member reveals one of the “powers” of Maghreb women as Brahimi explains: their “eternal youth.” From the perspective of the grandchild, this figure represents the “seul amour d’enfance qui ne souffre pas des changements que le temps apporte en nous” (“only childhood love that does not suffer from the changes that time brings upon us”), again reinforcing the sense of permanence.

Children seek the symbolic eternalness of the grandmother in the same way that the earth and all of its inhabitants depend upon the constant light of the sun. In fact, this highly respected family member signifies the archetype of familial love and nurture for the grandchild as Brahimi suggests. A grandmother of North African tradition stands apart within certain “flots privilégiés, où vivent quelques personnes éminemment charmantes, très vieilles, épargnées par le changement sans qu’on puisse les dire tout à fait hors du temps” (“privileged waves, where some eminently charming persons live, very old, saved by change without being considered completely timeless”). Although Brahimi would not consider the grandmother of L’œil completely outside of time, she indicates that the grandchild perceives this character as privileged, charming, and change-resistant. The honor that Tunisians associate with this grandparent explains why she becomes such an important symbol of cultural heritage. For Tunisians who live as

561 28.
562 Brahimi 36.
563 Brahimi 36-37.
orphans of history, their only foundation exists in their cultural identity. Therefore, those who contribute to conserving culture serve as a refuge against complete orphanhood.

While acting as a guardian of cultural tradition, the grandmother in L’œil also symbolizes the “eye of day” of the home by the way that she determines the functionality of the domestic space. The regularity of her movements, her stability, her permanence, her serenity, and her spiritual presence all evoke features that correspond to the influence, cycle, and presence of the sun. Just as the sun's light-energy determines the terrestrial life-cycle, the grandmother fulfills a principal role in the activities of the house. With her presence she controls her surroundings in the way that the sun influences life on earth.

Acting as the head of the culinary duties, organizing and even incarnating the objects and spaces of the home, the grandmother in L’œil becomes the center of the domestic universe. Due to the limited knowledge of the unskilled “cook,” the grandmother’s assistance with the menu proves essential. The responsibility of deciding on and carrying out the daily cuisine endows her with an “absolute, expected, [and] revered” “power.” Without her input, the household would cease to eat, speak, live, and sleep. By dictating the gastronomic schedule, the grandmother initiates the creation of the light of the domestic world: “Le menu est dicté et un tintamarre effréné organise la lumière du monde [. . .]” (“The menu is dictated and a frantic noise organizes the light of the world [. . .]”). Moreover, the dictated menu not only assures the sustenance of the household, but it also eliminates the “boredom, solitude, and grief.”

In addition to the grandmother’s culinary expertise, the integrity of her personality contributes to the well-being of the home. The serenity that inspires her virtue and

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564 Béji, L’œil 82-83.
optimism parallels the calming and reassuring warmth of the sun. Her remarkable composure moreover imitates the pattern and dependability of the sun with its cyclic reappearance. The symbolic reading of the sun as hope reveals the significance behind how L'œil portrays the grandmother's positive outlook on life. The particularly virtuous mindset of this character produces an atmosphere of grace regardless of the circumstances that arise. In potentially aggravating situations, the grandmother demonstrates an unusual ability to focus on the fortunate aspects of the scenario. The narrator recalls an episode in which an artisan, who tries to dust one of the chandeliers in the house, accidentally sends both the fixture and himself plummeting to the floor. Instead of grieving the ruined ornate lights, the grandmother considers the incident a providential blessing given how the artisan had survived the fall and the shattering glass. In her mind, the trade-off proves to be much more to their advantage: "elle perd un lustre pour gagner quelque chose de beaucoup plus précieux, la santé, la vie par exemple" ("she loses a chandelier in order to gain something much more precious, health, life for example"). Through this type of reasoning, she becomes the amazing "actrice, moraliste des péripéties de la maison qu'elle renverse en annonces et en prophéties de salut" ("role-player, moralist of incidents of the home that she transforms into announcements and prophecies of salvation"). The grandparent thus maintains an essential balance in life: "provision d'équilibres grâce auxquels l'essentiel ne sera pas touché" ("provision of stability on account of which the fundamental will not be touched"). Her "innocent mind" changes terrestrial woes into minor inconveniences under the "shadow of a great Good." Through her optimism, she demonstrates virtue that helps those around her to
forget “wounds and sadness.” The resulting household environment appears more secure and liberated.\textsuperscript{565}

As a devout Muslim, the grandmother also represents a source of spirituality. She carries out her daily meditations with a dedication that avoids all hypocrisy.\textsuperscript{566} Moreover, she possesses a metaphysical ability to transform objects around her and to save the narrator from the ethereal presence of Boutellis. In one occasion, the narrator shares her observations of her grandmother’s last prayer of the day. Through her metaphoric descriptions she communicates the mystery and beauty of this supernatural moment. As the elderly woman proceeds with her prayer, the narrator notices how the clamor around the grandmother gradually fades away. This circumstance compares to how the music of an orchestra would disappear behind the figure of a solo dancer. Next, the narrator sees how the grandmother oscillates between visibility and invisibility as her body sways in prayer, disorienting and drawing the viewer into the supernatural spell.\textsuperscript{567} In addition to invoking the intermediary state between presence and absence, the prayer alters the disposition of the items in the room. The narrator witnesses the transformation of the interior:

\[\ldots\text{] angle de vision remarquable, débarrassé du désordre des contingences, tout en restituant celles-ci dans leur rapport transparent avec elle, balancement, blancheur, tissu, tapis, miroir, lustre, fenêtre, coussins, rideaux, si bien qu’[elle]}\]

\textsuperscript{565} Béji, \textit{L’œil} 31-34.

\textsuperscript{566} Béji, \textit{Une force} 134.

\textsuperscript{567} Béji, \textit{L’œil} 171-72.
n’imaginai[t] plus qu’il pût exister de prière digne de ce nom sans la participation de cet attrait désuet.\textsuperscript{568}

[. . .] remarkable angle of view, rid of the disorder of contingencies, while restoring these [surroundings] to their transparent connection with [the grandmother], sway, whiteness, cloth, carpet, mirror, chandelier, window, cushions, curtain, so well that [the narrator] no longer imagined that a prayer could exist worthy of that name without the involvement of the outdated furnishings.

The articles in the room participate in the prayer by their simple presence next to the grandmother. She somehow incorporates everything around her—animal, vegetal or object—into her “web” and attitude of humility.\textsuperscript{569} While the narrator fails to “follow” her grandmother into the “ordre et cette clarté d’un ailleurs” (“order and this clarity of an elsewhere”), she still finds sincere “pleasure” and comfort in watching the prayer take place. Rather than praying, the narrator “pouvai[t] [s]’abandonner à toutes sortes de rêveries” (“could abandon [herself] to all sorts of daydreams”).\textsuperscript{570} The spiritual activity of the grandmother triggers a series of daydreams and thoughts that transports the narrator into her own world of imaginary meditations.

The grandmother’s spiritual faith that indicates her communion with Allah ironically also suggests crossing a border that approaches death. Yet the “double oblique of her body” that wavers between eternity and mortality illustrates an “infinite complicity

\textsuperscript{568} Béji, L’œil 175.

\textsuperscript{569} Béji, L’œil 179.

\textsuperscript{570} Béji, L’œil 179, 181.
with life.” Thus instead of vanishing into the metaphysical unknown, the grandmother brings and spreads her spirituality to those around her. With her devotion, she acts as an intermediary between the esoteric and terrestrial.⁵⁷¹ Although unintentional, this religious woman emanates her spirituality onto both animate and inanimate members and articles of her home just as a sun casts its warmth onto everything under its rays.

Likewise, the grandmother’s serenity influences the household by permeating her surroundings with calm. This is particularly true in the opening scene of L’œil involving the climactic event of the narrator’s encounter with Boutellis.⁵⁷² Referring to the recurring encounters with Boutellis as a “nightmare,” the narrator conveys the terrifying and uncontrollable sensation of being caught by the uncanny force. Doctors diagnosed this condition as a “cataplexie hypnagogique” or waking hallucinations. Yet believing these attacks to be spiritual in nature and requiring exorcism, the grandmother resorts to “amulets.” She thus places metallic objects, a miniature of the Quran, or a page of a “sura” under the pillow of the narrator.⁵⁷³ While both the doctors and the amulets prove useless in preventing Boutellis from returning, the sound of the grandmother’s shuffling slippers passing by the room ultimately rescues the granddaughter from her nightmare.

⁵⁷¹ Béji, L’œil 169.

⁵⁷² “Boutellis” refers to an anguishing condition that takes place during slumber in which the individual suddenly feels an encumbering paralyzing weight or the sensation of invasion by another entity accompanied by a dark cloud that hovers over the head. Nabile Farès examines the name “Boutellis” and considers it a barrier, spiritual or psychological, that prevents the narrator from awaking from her nightmare. By dividing the word as “Bou-t-llis,” he indicates the relationship between the father—“Bou” in Arabic—and the daughter—“llis” in Berber (Farès 65). From this analysis, Farès considers the narrator’s “retour” as one that seeks a “présence originaire du tombeau.” Thus, the “Boutellis” episode signifies the narrator dreaming of coming across the figurative tomb where the grave signals a possible death of the father-daughter relationship. Although Béji makes no clear reference to the father in L’œil, Farès’s interpretation sheds light on the “orphan” imagery of the death of the figurative father: Tunisia’s national history.

⁵⁷³ Béji, L’œil 9-10.
Like a “fairy with illuminated gestures,” the presence of the grandmother renders the invisible Boutellis creature “harmless.” Fairy-like—although in a different way than Baya—she becomes an oblivious savior who casts this haunting force back into “his grotesque void.”\(^{574}\)

The gentleness, order, and stability with which the grandmother routinely proceeds through her “domestic life” represent the powers that allow her to exorcize the spiritual entity. Displaying an “eternal old age” as she goes about her domestic activities, she appears to possess an “inaccessible truth” within the “magical compactness of her body.” Although incomprehensible to the narrator, a combination of “material and faith” guides the grandmother in her life conduct.\(^{575}\) Just as light might counter darkness in the literal and metaphysical senses, the elderly woman possesses a magically supernatural capacity to overcome unwanted forces. The eternal, spiritual, serene, and magical qualities of the grandparent that chase away Boutellis thus allude to characteristics that reinforce her connection to the sun.

On top of re-evaluating cultural and symbolic aspects of the grandmother and her home, the narrator also devotes an artistic eye to reinterpreting both the glory and wretchedness of Tunis. The desolate ruins within the urban setting had once flaunted beauty with its “royaume humble et discret d’anciens symboles urbains” (“humble and discrete kingdom of ancient urban symbols”). Yet like a wilting flower, they gradually languished into a “sad infertile Orient.” The only evidence of the former kingdom is an

\(^{574}\) Béji, L’euil 11.

\(^{575}\) Béji, L’euil 11-13.
accumulation of filth, household litter, closed doors, and dying courtyard trees.\textsuperscript{576} Calling the city a “miserable City,” the narrator pities the destitution that currently prevails. When describing the neighborhoods, streets, and abandoned dwellings, the narrator chooses words that indicate death, deterioration, and putrefaction: “lacs sont des miroirs morts”; “quartiers détruits, sa saleté sous la brume bleutée de ses terrasses”; “puanteur de ses rues” (“lakes are dead mirrors”; “destroyed neighborhoods, its dirtiness under the bluish haze of its terraces”; “stench of its streets”).\textsuperscript{577} Thus rather than displaying the “splendor” of the moment, the narrator studies the “most impersonal combinations of hazard” in order to convey also the misery, poverty, and abandonment afflicting neighborhoods like that of El Marr.\textsuperscript{578} Much the way the smell of “human excrement” pervades the memories of Algeria in Cixous’s \textit{Les rêveries},\textsuperscript{579} a stench of decay blankets the street like an “excessively tight-fitted bandage on a wound.”\textsuperscript{580}

Yet underneath the bandage of misfortune, the narrator also detects hidden realities and hints of beauty. And instead of writing as a “blind” painter she appears to “write-paint” with colors. For example, within the camouflage of filth that shrouds the urban surroundings, she finds a faded blue strip mid-way up on some of the city walls. Although the origins and purpose of this band of paint remains ambiguous, she describes how the color fluctuates from a “dirty turquoise” to a “violet trail.” Echoing the motif of blue, a “sky blue” also paints an area between the ground and a house uniting the two

\textsuperscript{576} Béji, \textit{L’œil} 111-12.

\textsuperscript{577} Béji, \textit{L’œil} 109.

\textsuperscript{578} Béji, \textit{Nūba} 31-32.

\textsuperscript{579} \textit{Les rêveries} 83.

\textsuperscript{580} Béji, \textit{L’œil} 112.
components together in a sort of “emptiness” or “floating [state].” By identifying these subtle colors, she resembles a painter who discerns and captures the fragile hues of ordinary surroundings onto his canvas.

Along the other walls, the narrator also notices a pink stripe that seems to balance out the cool tones of turquoise, violet, and blue. Yet in contrast to other vibrant shades of pink, this pink appears pallid, lacking in vitality: “[p]reciosité manquée, trop naïve, rudimentaire, artifice presque inutile, tulle râche d’un mauvais mariage, rose sans douceur, fard sans éclat, bâclé, effacé, effiloché comme l’ourlet en satin synthétique d’une robe mal coupée [. . .] [r]ose inharmonieux, rose incompréhensible [. . .]” (“lost preciosity, too naive, rudimentary, almost useless artifice, coarse tulle of a bad marriage, pink without softness, rouge without radiance, botched, erased, frayed like the synthetic satin hemline of a poorly-cut dress [. . .] disharmonious pink, incomprehensible pink [. . .]”). Through metaphorical illustrations of futility, failure, and attenuation, the narrator gives new meaning to the “disharmonious” color that lines the streets. The inadequate pink even mirrors the pollution of the city by resembling the litter scattered in the streets:

Rose cru de la rue, froid, irriguant les poubelles [. . .] rose un peu violet de la misère [. . .] rose en démolition mêlé à la poussière des briques [. . .] rose de l’anonymat, rose mouillé de fruits pourris, nauséabond, rose un peu animal, flair urbain [. . .] rose désinvolte, barbouillé [. . .].

Raw pink of the street, cold, irrigating the trash bins [. . .] slightly violet pink of misery [. . .] pink in the process of demolition mixed with the dust of bricks [. . .]

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581 Béji, L’œil 99.

582 Béji, L’œil 100-01.
pink of anonymity, pink dampened by rotten fruit, nauseating, slightly beastly pink, urban flair [. . .] casual, smeared pink [. . .]

As a neglected yet integral part of the daily urban existence, the association of the unsettling tone of pink with city life in turn signifies the “unique spirit of Tunis.” The color conveys the conflicting sentiments that swarm the metropolis: “indifférence,” “hantise,” “fronde,” “encanaillement,” “grâce,” “vulgarité,” “tension,” “éclat arrêté,” “inspiration meurtrie,” “crasse insupportable que l’on finit par supporter,” “profondeur sauvage et blessée à côté de l’existence normale, de la paix du jour, des sentiments” (“indifference,” “obsessive fear,” “revolt,” “debauchery,” “grace,” “vulgarity,” “tension,” “arrested brilliance,” “bruised inspiration,” “unbearable foulness that one ends up bearing,” “wild and wounded depth next to normal existence, the day’s peace, feelings”). And just as the pink strip remains disregarded by passers-by, the various worries and scenarios of urban life never completely break the calm surface of what seems to be a “normal existence.”

These intermixing images and sentiments that emerge from simple colors constitute Tunis’s “fresque simpliste et déboussolée des murs” (“simplistic and disoriented wall frescos”). Like the frescos of the city walls, the narrator’s memory of her home in Tunis comes to her as an imaginary “fresco of the past” containing the familiar voices from her childhood. As an interpreter of the metropolitan frescos, the narrator identifies both beauty and symbolic redefinition of the banal urban existence.

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583 Although no further elaboration exists in this part of the text regarding this “spirit of Tunis,” what Béji explains in L’imposture culturelle reveals the discomforts and discontentment of Tunisians.

584 Béji, L’œil 101.

585 Béji, L’œil 95. This allusion to a “fresque” seems to echo the lengthy poetic description of the “fresques” in Proust’s Du côté de chez Swann (183-84).
Similar to Baya's contributions to painting, Béji offers a unique vision of reality that gives new significance to color. Yet rather than simply recreating a euphoric setting, the latter also indicates the devastation that marks Tunis life.

The narrator reinforces the artistic imagery of Tunis by portraying another scene that resembles a painting. She describes a descending mist as a "hidden paintbrush" that gives a touch of a "pathetic, powerless, mellow ray" to the atmosphere.\textsuperscript{586} The water dampens the setting like a delicate layer of shading that an artist adds to his picture to evoke the somberness of suppressed sadness. Then, the setting sun casts a light over the figures and the house giving them the final highlighting touches that a painter would give to an almost-finished canvas.\textsuperscript{587}

In addition to artistically depicting the scenes of the city of Tunis, the narrator introduces circumstances that blur dichotomies just as an artist might blend two colors. Through a thematic play between "container" and "contained"—e.g. by mixing the elements of interior with those of the exterior—she confuses the distinction of designated borders. The concept of "parergon" informs how the emergence of different notions of space causes the disintegration of spatial boundaries. Within the grandmother's home for example, the narrator identifies situations where interior and exterior territories overlap. Examining the lighting that falls inside the residence, she perceives the watercolor-like reflections that the sunrays outline on the walls. The external light source gives the rooms a pristine ambiance without exposing the interior space to the "undone reality of

\textsuperscript{586} Béji, \textit{L'œil} 102.

\textsuperscript{587} Béji, \textit{L'œil} 95.
the street.” While the narrator notes the distinct separation between the sacred quality of the home and the destabilizing forces of the outdoors, she perceives how the two spheres still coincide.

Likewise, while studying the courtyard of a neighbor, the narrator notices a similar phenomenon. Even though she is standing outside, she sees how the exterior space has become a continuation of the decorative interior: “Au lieu d’une cour maussade, c’était la splendeur intérieure qui se déployait plus loin qu’elle, hors de ses frontières” (“Instead of a dreary courtyard, it was a splendid interior that spreads out farther than itself, outside of its boundaries”). This blurring of the private and public boundaries produces a new reality that appears as neither strictly one nor both. Moreover, the overextension of the domestic interior to the outdoors undermines the traditional designation of domestic/interior and public/exterior.

The motif of the merging interior and exterior realms reappears when the narrator is exploring the empty forsaken houses of her neighborhood. Falling into disarray, these untouched dwellings resemble “nature never explored by man.” Upon entering one of these structures, the narrator notices how the home has become a hybrid of synthetics and nature. Some sections of the dwelling have reverted to a “wild state” while other parts have remained well preserved: painted wood, a door, a window, or a tiled ledge. The façade echoes the “simplicity” of the interior by including identical “earthenware,” “friezes,” “stucco,” and “woodworks.” In turn, the “effervescence of the neighborhood”

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588 Béji, L’œil 77-78.
589 Béji, L’œil 74.
590 Béji, L’œil 75.
flows into the “beautés chromatiques des antichambres et des cloisons” (“chromatic beauties of the antechamber and partitions”).\textsuperscript{591} The image of the interpenetrating wilderness and domestic space echoes the picture of the neighbor’s courtyard. The wilderness of the outside seems to invade the interior of the forgotten man-made residences in the same way that the interior of the home had pervaded the exterior space.

Just as spatial designations between inside and outside collapse, the distinction of person from object or space also disintegrates in \textit{L’œil}. The overlapping parallel between the bodice of the grandmother and the home that she occupies reveals the intimate connection between the person and the dwelling: “[T]he narrator describes her grandmother’s control over the spatial occupation in her home, while also comparing the intimacy of the home to that of her own body, where she keeps the keys to all the parts of her home.”\textsuperscript{592} The inversed notion of the dwelling within the person, rather than the individual within the home reveals how the narrator presents the two spaces—human and architectural—as interchangeable.

Susan Stewart’s analysis of space and identity in \textit{On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection} helps to illuminate the notion of the grandmother incarnating the home. Stewart claims that: “The body presents the paradox of contained and container at once.” On the one hand, the physical person becomes an “object” that occupies an enclosed space. On the other, the body also represents a physical space with limits that depend on how far the person can extend herself into the

\textsuperscript{591} Béji, \textit{L’œil} 76.

\textsuperscript{592} Brosseau and Ayari 282.
surrounding space.\textsuperscript{593} Similarly, the various objects that the grandmother in \textit{L'œil} owns and safeguards define her being. In some cases she projects her presence through the sounds that she makes. For example, her slippers, her cane, the sound of clothing brushing against furniture, her keys, and the creaking of the wardrobe, all become an auditory extension of her body. Likewise, the clinking of her pan and her prayer beads that orchestrate the music of “morning-time coming and going” also constitute a part of her being.\textsuperscript{594}

The grandmother thus represents a multi-dimensional “contained” dweller and keeper of the home. Yet she simultaneously signifies the “container” by symbolically possessing the home within her in the same way that a frame might contain a painting. The narrator’s descriptions of the grandmother transform the latter into the space of her collections. By keeping handkerchiefs, keys, and other essential items within her bodice, she metaphorically “carries” the house around with her: “Toute la maison est dans le corsage de ma grand-mère […]” (“The whole house is in the bodice of my grandmother […]”). She stores every article that is central to the “good working of the home”: purses, prayer beads, and keys. Without the grandmother, no one could access the various rooms, stairways, and storage wardrobes of the home. Moreover, the bodice’s “inexhaustible cavern” follows the same “law of organization of the home.” With the same meticulous attention and benevolence that she exercises to run the house, she cautiously uses the objects within her bodice to care for the home and the residents so that “rien ne peut


\textsuperscript{594} Béji, \textit{L’œil} 13.

If the grandmother metaphorically incarnates the home through her bodice, another character becomes the icon of street life: an old homeless man. The narrator describes this individual in a manner that emphasizes his integral connection to the rest of the urban society. She first emphasizes the commonalities between the beggar and the other people walking in the city. The homeless man makes his place along the street within the everyday setting of Tunis. Any other man of his age and stature would have appeared unremarkable given his “neutral mold” of “natural existence.” Yet the difference lies in the misery that the individual has suffered. Despite the perfectly fitted turban, he lives in such poverty that his “humanity covered him like a skin.” The parts of his humanity that his wretched existence has weathered away reappear in mutated and unrecognizable forms. While visibly wearing his destitution, he holds a bundled handkerchief that signifies his only possession. As if his deliverance depended on the contents of this piece of cloth, the man cautiously tends to the few shiny coins found in his collection. At the same time, the cacophonous activity of the street of El Marr seems to leave its sound in the fabric of the handkerchief. The disheveled man thus holds not only a “coin menu” and other “immeasurable treasures” but also the street within his hands. Again, the reversed spatial order suggests an unbreakable interconnectedness between the individual and his urban surroundings.

595 Béji, L’œil 119-20.

596 Béji, L’œil 115-16.
Even while making contrasting references to the domestic and public spaces through the figures of the grandmother and the homeless man, the narrator still emphasizes the commonality of their humanity. By employing an intentional thematic transition from the handkerchiefs of the grandmother’s bodice to the handkerchief of the “old man” she creates an analogy between the two individuals. The grandmother bases her life on the home and the objects of her collection just as the elderly man’s existence revolves around the contents of his handkerchief. Moreover, the bodice of the grandparent figuratively contains the entire “home” in the same way that the man’s handkerchief holds the entire “street” on which he resides. The parallel partially redeems the old man’s condition while also creating another intersection within spatial (private and public) and social (privileged and destitute) realms. The narrator moreover signals how both figures play equally prominent yet overlooked roles in society. With her re-evaluative “eye,” she thus provides a renewed look at the integral elements that compose the life and identity of her heritage. If Baya draws away the curtains of convention to project a new vision of the world, Béji scrutinizes everyday existence to rediscover the disregarded intrinsic values that define Tunisian culture.

597 Béji’s allusions to the corsage of the grandmother as holding the entire house (Béji, L’œil 119) and to the homeless old man’s handkerchief containing the whole street of El Marr (Béji, L’œil 116) evoke Proust’s cup of tea and “madeleine” that together contained Combray and its surroundings (Proust 145). Such parallels explain the comparisons that critics make between Béji and Proust.

598 Béji, L’œil 115-21.
At the Dawn of True Liberation

As part of L’œil’s re-evaluative depictions of Tunisian society, the comparative portrayal of the lifestyles of the grandmother and of the modernist feminist society clearly reflects Béji’s critical voice. Unlike Baya or Cixous who introduce a new image of women or of feminine writing, Béji presents a viewpoint that breaks away from modernity in order to maintain a more traditional notion of femininity. While Béji strongly supports women’s emancipation, she reconsiders the role that her fellow female citizens should play within the overall circumstance of their decolonized nation. In order to effectively examine L’œil’s critique of modernist women, this subsection will draw on Béji’s other texts. The analysis will consequently strive to situate the author’s arguments within the context of her other writings.

The critical essays L’imposture and Une force provide information on Béji’s personal and theoretical background that helps to shed light on her position with respect to current sociopolitical and feminist debates. The two texts offer details of her upbringing and reveal how her transcultural heritage had formed her transceptive viewpoint as a writer and critic. She dedicates Une force to furthering the critiques that she makes against modernist feminists in L’œil. Béji’s Une force points out the problematic aspects of Occidental and Tunisian modern feminist thinkers and challenges them on two levels: to undo the stigma that they have attached to traditional Muslim women and to recognize the importance of tradition in maintaining social stability. Béji insists that the death of tradition will result in the death of modern society. She argues for a new feminist position that re-values the foremothers of antiquity in order to restore modern women to a true spirit of liberation. In turn, the people of Tunisia will be more
equipped to confront the multiple crises of decolonization and thus recover a stable collective identity.

The author’s motivations as a critic appear in L’œil’s insightful examination of the archetypal grandmother, the home, and the people and city of Tunis. Information about Béji’s childhood setting and education elucidate the sociopolitical position that she projects in L’œil and in Une force. Based on the autobiographical details that she provides in Une force, she grew up in a household of multiple generations, traditions, and perspectives. Her mother manifested a particularly insurgent spirit and thus represented the “face of rebellion.” Nothing could compete with this parent’s determination in assuring absolute freedom for herself and for her daughter. 599 Growing up in an atmosphere of liberation, Béji felt repulsion toward “submissive women.” 600 In turn her father, a “liberal Muslim,” possessed an “innate tolerance” and an amiability that allowed him to overcome all obstacles that he might have encountered. He never attempted to subject his daughter to orders but rather “veillait sur [ses] libertés avec une indulgence rouée, et c’était lui qui semblait [l’]obéir” (“watched over [her] liberties with keen indulgence, and it was him who seemed to obey her”). 601

Additionally, with an academic background in both Tunisian and French institutions, Béji maintains an intermediary position that gives her the ability to make discerning comparative critiques. Aware of the predominating attitudes and customs of both Tunisian and French cultures, she identifies paradoxes and commonalities that

599 Béji, Une force 8-10.

600 Une force 12.

601 Béji, Une force 22-23.
would remain invisible from a single viewpoint that might lack an awareness of the “plurality” of a given individual or society. Finally, witnessing the transition of her country from a colonized state to an independent nation, she understands the challenges associated with the dynamics of each political structure. Different than Oedipus’s transpective position in *Oedipe philosophe* (*Oedipe*)—an awareness of an unconscious inner self—Béji’s transpection displays a cross-cultural and cross-generational perceptiveness that uncovers the problematic circumstances afflicting Tunisian society.

In the text *L'imposture*, Béji explains how her upbringing has contributed to developing her transpective insight. Having grown up within a “deeply archaic universe” due to her grandmother yet enjoying an “intellectual modern life,” Béji realizes the peculiarity of her circumstance. She had the privilege of intimately knowing both perspectives. The “memory of the traditional feminine world” helps Béji discover more “sur le sens du présent autant que sur celui du passé, et [lui] donne-t-elle sur la condition féminine des lumières que le monde moderne—si [elle] n’avaient connu que lui seul—ne [lui] aurait pas révélées” (“about the sense of the present as much as of the past, and it gives [her] [insight] on the condition of women’s enlightenment that the modern world—if [she] had known only that [world]—would not have revealed to [her]”).

Familiar with the Catholic background of an anticlerical mother and the Muslim heritage of the father, Béji also finds herself situated in a “passe-partout” space between the Orient and the Occident. Yet rather than finding conflict between the two intersecting worlds, she embraces the blended duality by stating: “La terre où je me contemple est l’Orient, le lieu où je m’exprime est l’Occident” (“The land where I think to myself is the Orient, the

602 Une force 45.
place where I express myself is the Occident”). While her thinking reflects the Orient, she chooses to write in the language of the Occident with which she grew up: French. Due to the harmony that Béji finds between the Tunisian and French cultures, the French language favorably contributes to defining her identity rather than creating a source of tension. At the same time, this decision to “express” herself in the Occident may also reflect the sense of liberty that Béji finds in writing outside of the Orient. While signifying the “colonizer’s language,” French contains a “foreignness” for North African authors that allows them to maintain a distance from what they write, as Brosseau and Ayari deduce.

Rather than belonging to one cultural viewpoint, Béji has adopted both the Oriental and Occidental positions as her “two inseparable twins.” Since her parents have never forced her to abide by any particular cultural custom of the Tunisian society, she considers herself equally feminine as masculine and equally Oriental as Occidental. On the one hand, she sees the fragility of assuming such a multifaceted position since it requires extra care to preserve whatever “virtue” remains. On the other, her transcultural insight helps her to defend an “immorality” that counters the arbitrary “prudery” that formerly signified feminine virtue. With the analytical mind that she develops on account of her extensive education, she frees herself from the absurdities of “conformism.”

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603 Béji, L'imposture 13.
604 281.
605 Béji, Une force 29.
606 Béji, Une force 32-34.
Béji’s Oriental and Occidental halves therefore coexist like a “mysterious logic.” Within the mysterious relationship of her bicultural background, she finds a “natural acquiescence.” The domestic world converges with her intellectual mind “dans le secret inaccessible de [sa] conscience” (“in the inaccessible secret of her conscience”).\textsuperscript{607} The realm of unattainable conscience, or the subconscious, points to a transpectivity that gives her greater sensitivity to certain subtleties of Tunisian life. On account of the “passe-partout” space of her transcultural intuition, she can discern the complicated realities that affect the modern society just as Derrida identifies the “truth” of painting in the undesignated area found between a painting and its border.

Likewise, the sentimental and intellectual components of Béji’s subjectivity signify “two branches of her life.” These branches interact like two opposing poles that spark the energy needed to generate truth. Thus realizing the importance of valuing both components of her identity, she finds no threat in paying honor to the “archaic women” of her heritage. She can enjoy independence and liberation in her judgments and everyday life while still recognizing how her female ancestors have contributed equally valuable wisdom to understanding the condition of modern Tunisian women. Remembering tradition and its corresponding circumstances therefore represents a step of progress rather than a retreat back toward a fanatical state of mind. In Béji’s opinion, extremist “sectarianism” results from an intolerant disdain toward “liberty” and “originality” rather than from a conservative way of thinking. Only those who suffer from an incapacitating phobia of antiquity might feel trapped by the idea of revisiting tradition.\textsuperscript{608} Instead of

\textsuperscript{607} Béji, \textit{Une force} 143.

\textsuperscript{608} Béji, \textit{Une force} 50-51.
fearing entrapment, therefore, Béji understands the complementary aspects of different cultural and generational factors that will assist in explaining and resolving the crises undermining Tunisian society.

Béji’s L’œil revisits tradition in order to set up a comparison between two lifestyles of women found in Tunisia. In the process, the author challenges the misconceptions that some hegemonic Western feminists construct about traditional women and the domestic space. She even shows how the modernizing sociocultural circumstance contrasts negatively with her grandmother’s existence. As the narrator of L’œil compares the women of the “Neptune” restaurant—women who are “transformed into diplomats”—to the grandmother, she claims that the thoughts of these modern feminists contain “mille fois moins de science et d’art que ne tourne [sa] grand-mère sa vieille cuillère dans la saveur de l’existence” (“a thousand times less science and arts than what [her] grandmother stirs into the flavor of existence with her old wooden spoon”).

The deliberate juxtaposition of the shortcomings of the newly emerging feminist society next to the grandmother’s wisdom of antiquity underlines the irreplaceable value of the latter.

As the narrator examines the notorious women of the Neptune restaurant, she uncovers the paradoxes of the “condition of women’s enlightenment.” Various details on the location of the pseudo-modernist society’s meetings and the content of the women’s conversations betray the superficiality of their elitist reunions. From outside of the Neptune restaurant, one would smell the aroma of fried fish and see an “aquatic

609 Béji, L’œil 135.

610 Béji, L’œil 45.
lapping” that composed the base of the building. Despite its “rêverie frileuse et monotone du large” (“hesitant and monotonous daydream of the open sea”) it resembles a powerless “divinity” who has no other place to reside but in a “corner of a deserted suburb.” The conflicting imagery between the daydream and the actuality gives insight into the contrast that the narrator perceives between the appearance and reality of the Neptune society.

Despite the intentional elitism of the Neptune restaurant women, they fail to appear any more distinguished in their countenance or knowledge than the grandmother who lives out the traditional domestic lifestyle. An unspoken rule of “conformism” dominates the Neptune community just as the “goût puéril des distractions de l’adolescence” (“childish taste of adolescent distraction”) dictates the actions of the middle-aged attendees. This space becomes an “endroit pour les oisifs, les songe-creux dont l’existence s’est rétrécie en quelques visites hebdomadaires de courtoisie dans les alentours” (“place for the lazy, the hollow-dreamed whose existence is reduced to some weekly courtesy visits in the neighborhood”). The reason for their attendance is to find a “reason to exist” in the midst of their boredom. An absurdity underlies this pseudo-aristocratic atmosphere where the members attempt to create an “illusion d’être ce qu’ils ne sont pas” (“illusion of being what they are not”). For this reason, the women resemble “artificial flowers.” Yet despite their poised beauty, they will inevitably age into expired versions of themselves with “airs fatigués, presque en proie à l’accablement, les traits du visage affaissés par l’ennui, levantine, sans esprit, coulée à tout jamais dans

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611 Béji, L'œil 128.
612 Béji, L'œil 127.
ce que sera sa vie” (“fatigued appearance, almost prey to despondency, the facial features sagging from boredom, old, mindless, sunk forever into what her life will be”). Moreover, even with their self-proclaimed virility, the women of Neptune continue to manifest their “ancestral silhouette” and their “harem relics” giving them a paradoxical appearance of possessing “anachronous femininity and modern androgyny.” The restaurant becomes a place for impressing others, but where one ends up being caught up in meaningless charades.

Then, in Une force, Béji offers a more informative analysis of the provocative insinuations that she makes in L’œil. Like in the latter text, the former offers a transcultural perspective of the condition of Tunisian women. From Béji’s intermediary position, she realizes the misunderstandings that modern Occidental women have developed concerning their traditional Oriental counterpart. For example, by imagining that all Oriental Muslim women exist in a simplified “pure state,” Occidental feminists have created an exaggerated inaccurate picture of a “codified” tradition that fails to account for the diverse realities of the Muslim woman. In turn, by watching the endless “prejudices” and “counter-prejudices” that have been reappearing over the several past decades amidst the intellectual wars among feminists, and the various false illusions that have been subsequently formed, Béji questions the progress that the modernist women believe that they are making. In particular, she wonders how relieving themselves of tradition can bring them closer to creating a more humane

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613 Béji, L’œil 131.
614 Béji, L’œil 127.
615 Béji, Une force 18-19.
616 Béji, Une force 21.
society.\textsuperscript{617} How much more equipped would they be than men in solving national and global sociopolitical problems?\textsuperscript{618}

Although Béji’s questions provoke tentative and debatable answers, the author continues to draw from her transpective vision in order to find a solution. On the one hand, she admires the serenity and enduring strength that her grandmother carries within her. On the other, she also recognizes the oppression that women still suffer today in the name of tradition: a condition from which she had escaped.\textsuperscript{619} With regard to the latter circumstance, Béji admits to how much the image of “submissive women” had horrified her throughout her childhood. Moreover, she strongly condemns any gesture that purposely keeps women uneducated. This becomes a crime by condoning the most debasing act that a civilized society can inflict upon women and also upon the “noblesse et la dignité de l’homme lui-même” (“nobility and dignity of man himself”). This contestable practice originates from a “lack of generosity” to humankind and also from the “dryness of their sensibility.” By depriving half of humanity the right to intellectual development, a society cheats itself of its full functional potential and of the enlightened justice that it should implement.\textsuperscript{620}

Although Béji recognizes that “cruelty” and “injustice” still pervade her society and victimize young Muslim girls, she nonetheless identifies the advantages of women in Tunisia. Like for the grandmother, age gives a woman an incontestable authority, seduction, and eventual veneration within her community. In fact, through the power of

\textsuperscript{617} Béji, Une force 150.

\textsuperscript{618} Béji, Une force 121.

\textsuperscript{619} Béji, Une force 53.

\textsuperscript{620} Béji, Une force 42.
maternity, a woman turns the tables and rules over man. Within the “invincible,” “controlling,” and “untiring” domestic sphere, Béji notices that man’s figure of authority melts into one of “well-being” and “irresponsibility.”621 Moreover, even women who have suffered from “collective oppression” discover ways to use tradition and custom to their advantage in order to foster their talents and inspirations.622 In fact, women rarely continue to live their lives, blind to or unaware of their circumstance. They possess an “omniscience of their condition” much the way they innately recognize the taste of liberty. In fact, even the most suppressed woman still sustains a spirit of revolt that manifests itself in the slightest details. When the smallest opportunity arises, she will fight “to the end.”623

Béji believes that women in the domestic sphere have proved to “reign as mistress” instead of living as helpless victims of patriarchal oppression.624 Yet in comparison to Assia Djebar’s readings of Delacroix’s paintings of Algerian women or of Allami’s psychoanalysis of Madame D., Béji’s claim appears contradictory. Recognizing the paradoxical connotations that a “modern feminine conscience” might thus deduce from the image of the reigning woman, Béji explains her statement. Even within the traditional feminine role, “c’est la femme qui dirige son destin et celui des siens, même si, extérieurement, elle semble le subir” (“it is the woman who directs her destiny and that of her household, even if, externally, she seems to be subjected to them”) such that the

621 Béji, Une force 70-72.
622 Béji, Une force 50.
623 Béji, Une force 78-79.
624 Béji, Une force 12, 38.
former relationship between the gendered roles “ends up reversing itself.”

Occupying such a principal role within the family, women determine the destiny of the household to the point where they ultimately act as the head.

Throughout antiquity, Tunisian women have therefore maintained a powerful role in their society. The domestic and often illiterate situations of the foremothers, moreover, have not prevented them from demonstrating their natural intellect and strength. Béji recognizes an “intelligence innée de l’émancipation féminine” (“innate intelligence of women’s emancipation”) within her traditional elders whom the modernizing generation tries to override. Women from antiquity possess a “mysterious strength” that Béji identifies and defends. Through personal interactions with uneducated women in Tunisia, she recognizes “the most basic intelligence” of traditional figures who not only manifest their fundamental wisdom, but also expose the persistent “ignorance” of educated modern women. In Béji’s observations of her grandmother, she recognizes the “natural intellect” that governs this woman in her “conduite, ses pensées, ses vérités, [et] sa religion” (“conduct, her thoughts, her truths, [and] her religion.”) In fact, this individual possesses a remarkable “conscience of things” and serenity that impress and baffle Béji.

In contrast to the serenity that the grandmother evokes in L’œil, modern Tunisian women face a new era of discomfort and discontentment. In order to uncover the source

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625 Béji, Une force 39.
626 Béji, Une force 68.
627 Une force 46.
628 Béji, Une force 100-01.
629 Une force 134.
of their unhappiness, Béji acts as a painter who composes a self-portrait by gazing at
herself in a mirror. As a literary painter, she aims to “[pénétrer] dans la perspective clair-
obscure du temps” (“pierce into time’s grey perspective.”)\textsuperscript{630} With her awareness of both
traditional Muslim and intellectual modern lifestyles, she examines her life experiences in
order to explain the crises that she observes. By studying the “bucolic paintings of its
memory” she begins to analyze modern women’s sentiment of “uneasiness” and
“dismay.”\textsuperscript{631} Béji hypothesizes that this discomfort and discontentment come from the
circumstance of an “unaccomplished destiny of her liberty.” Despite women’s innate
inclination to improve their condition through their pursuit of liberty, Béji recognizes a
discrepancy between their hopes and the reality “sur laquelle elles n’ont pas de prise”
(“that they cannot grasp”). This disconcerting inconsistency causes the “anomalies” that
subsequently affect the “entire social system.”\textsuperscript{632}

The society’s demands for conformism continue to mentally incarcerate even the
supposed “modern and liberated” women. Béji believes that a “fabricated femininity”
consequently replaces the former “innate femininity” due to the pressures of modern
convention.\textsuperscript{633} As modernists construct a substitute lifestyle for traditional women, they
induce their current uncertain and isolated circumstance. The liberated modern women
focus more on the individual and less on relationships. A harsh indifference prevails that
shouts: “Je n’attends rien de personne!” (“I expect nothing from anyone!”). Equally
insinuating, “[s]urtout qu’on ne s’avise pas d’attendre quelque chose de moi!”

\textsuperscript{630} Une force 47.

\textsuperscript{631} Béji, Une force 49, 53.

\textsuperscript{632} Béji, Une force 92-93.

\textsuperscript{633} Béji, Une force 52.
("[m]oreover that one does not expect something from me!")}, this new individualistic system promotes solitude.\textsuperscript{634} Despite the independence and sexual freedom that women gain, they sacrifice a spiritual interior space: the "scène spirituelle de [leur] propre demeure" ("spiritual scene of [their] own home"). Even with their sense of "triumph," they suffer new states of "exile," "uncertainty," and "undecided orientation" that originate from a mentality that Béji describes as "anachronistic."\textsuperscript{635} Modern women believe that they will acquire this new individualistic and temporally displaced autonomy by discarding the restrictive burdens of antiquity. Unfortunately, they simultaneously cut off their most affective relationships and replace them with more "cold [. . .] distant [. . .] anonymous" versions.\textsuperscript{636} In turn, Béji questions the progress of humankind when the American cinema portrays women as bestial, savage, and brutal instead of helping to humanize society. Rather than advancing the feminine image, the representation of aggression goes to the other extreme by rendering women "inhuman."\textsuperscript{637} Therefore, instead of joyfully benefiting from progress, women endure additional anguish from the effects of modernization.\textsuperscript{638}

Other factors that add to the distress of women include how modernity replaces tradition with new predominating values and challenges: "success"/"setback," "liberty"/"anguish," and "work"/"solitude." Although "performance," "professional output," and "economic sanction" emerge as the contemporary guiding forces, Béji identifies a new

\textsuperscript{634} Béji, Une force 96.

\textsuperscript{635} Béji, Une force 76-77, 131.

\textsuperscript{636} Béji, Une force 97.

\textsuperscript{637} Une force 117-19.

\textsuperscript{638} Béji, Une force 131.
self-imposed form of repression: women "pressentent avec une intériorité blessée ces nouveaux fers du progrès, qui leur gâtent la douceur de la liberté qu’elles viennent à peine de goûter" ("sense with a wounded interior these new chains of progress, that spoil the sweetness of liberty that they just barely tasted"). They escape the "despotic order" of the domestic life only to find themselves in another—the "political order." The latter order consists of the overwhelming responsibility of providing for the "general interest." The demands of this new role replace their former hardships with submission.

The uncertainty with which women struggle today also results from their incomprehension of both their past and present circumstances. The confusion and chaos originate from the limits of human memory and the fear of the unknown. Moreover, women force themselves into a new "double" role with regard to their domestic life/gender and their new political responsibility/mind. The burden of living a double life cancels out the sense of liberty that women thought they had obtained through their liberation from the traditional posture of submission. Split between two conflicting worlds and lacking a definite sense of freedom, women suffer from their state of dissonance.

The paradoxes that women face in a modernizing society thus explain their undermined identity. Having shed the security of tradition, women find themselves in an awkward and unstable position of limbo. Béji reconsiders women’s progress in the contemporary society by indicating how they unsuccessfully struggle to participate within

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639 Une force 135-36.
640 Béji, Une force 153.
641 Béji, Une force 84.
642 Béji, Une force 154-55.
the realm of politics. Moreover, when societies attempt to promote women into political roles through affirmative action, Béji doubts that this gesture will truly help women become more qualified citizens. Instead, women will occupy a superficial role that values her gender rather than her virtues, talents, and merit. This observation consequently raises a pertinent issue: “Qu’est-ce qui se révèle le plus important: se faire valoir comme femme ou comme être humain ?” (“What proves to be the most important: make oneself feel worthy as a woman or as a human being?”).643

In turn, Béji challenges modern feminists who assume that all women in traditional Muslim homes are hopelessly resigned to injustice. For example, she speaks of a husband coming from the most traditional household who would treat his wife with the utmost “sensitivity and consideration.” In contrast, she refers to circumstances where men supporting feminist endeavors act with “rustic flippancy.”644 By leaving behind the domestic sphere that Béji believes to represent the “irreplaceable property of women,” women would permanently wound themselves. The former world of tradition represents the influential position from which they could imprint their “mark of humanity onto the world.” By abandoning the domestic space that they have claimed as theirs for centuries, they would sacrifice their interpersonal giftedness. As they strive to pursue a career and power in individualism, they lose the occasion to use their common sense and “genuine energy.” This in turn explains the overall disintegration of relationships and the melancholy of women today.645

643 Une force 124-26. However, Béji’s overlooks the central problem that affirmative action seeks to overcome: gender discrimination that could devalue woman’s true merit.

644 Béji, Une force 42.

645 Une force 150-51.
As a step toward resolving the crisis affecting the modernizing Tunisian society, Béji allies with feminists who defend tradition. They uphold a new feminism that attempts to “reconstruire un ordre des sexes que le modernisme a brouillé, et à restaurer une condition féminine qui ne serait pas livrée à l’inquiétude métaphysique de son identité” (“reconstruct an order of sexes that modernism has confused, and to restore a feminine condition that would not be delivered into the metaphysical anxiety of [woman’s] identity”). She supports this movement and accordingly invites modernists to reconsider and embrace the traditional values of their ancestors. In order to encourage the protection of tradition, she emphasizes how the two supposedly distinct timeframes of ancient and modern actually converge in their strengths. For this reason she underlines the moral and intellectual qualities of the grandmother in L’œil. Through this principal figure, Béji re-values the characteristics typically associated with traditional women. Within the domestic sphere, the grandmother carries herself with authority and aptitude that defy the notions of oppression or submission. Rather than appearing as archaic or retrograde, this character remains innocent and oblivious to the modernizing world around her as Brahim proposes: “La grand-mère ne résiste pas à la modernité, attitude par ailleurs connue et répertoriée; mais tout simplement elle l’ignore et n’y songe même pas […]” (“The grandmother does not resist modernity, an attitude known and identified elsewhere; but she simply ignores it and does not even think of it […]”). Resembling a “fairy” who thrives in the domestic world, the grandmother finds her life complete.

646 Béji, Une force 123.
without any need of the exterior world. She carries herself with such ease and composure that serenity characterizes her every action.\footnote{Brahimi 28-29.}

By indicating how the grandmother signifies the values of traditional ancient women, Béji simultaneously reminds twenty-first century Tunisian women of the valuable role that their foremothers have fulfilled. Moreover, through this gesture, Béji offers her fellow citizens—women and men alike—the means to overcome the sentiment of “orphanhood” that they presently suffer. In order for modern women to rebuild their new subjectivity, they must revisit and re-“immerse” themselves into the ancient: “les esprits vraiment modernes ne sont pas des ‘modernistes’ à tout crin […] cette immersion dans l’ancien, cette seconde peau où l’on meurt pour renaître, afin de retrouver la densité de son corps, est parfois nécessaire si l’on ne veut pas traverser son époque comme une ombre” (“the truly modern minds are not the modernists necessarily […] the immersion into the ancient, the second skin within which one dies to be born again, in order to rediscover the density of one’s body, is sometimes necessary if one does not want to go through one’s existence living like a shadow”).\footnote{Béji, \textit{Une force} 69.} In fact, in the mind of Béji, the two versions of women—ancient and modern—remain “indivisible.”\footnote{\textit{Une force} 132.} When women die to their false selves—whether crushed or fabricated—they can be “reborn” into a new skin and a new identity.\footnote{Béji, \textit{Une force} 69.} This imagery evokes a similar notion proposed by Cixous concerning how women need to rediscover their true selves through an act of rebirth. In Béji’s case, women will reach their “right birth” by fully understanding and accepting the
values of traditional women. By doing so, they will “find the density of [their] bod[ies].”

The fusion of the ancient and modern worlds therefore summarizes Béji’s main argument in *Une force*. By returning to the foundations established by traditional women, modern women will discover the fundamental density and strength of their identity. They can build on the ancient feminine force that has endured through the present. Before women can attain “new wisdom,” they must accept the indivisibility between the past and present. Béji perceives a “rapport intime et secret entre ces deux conditions apparemment antithétiques, et même une généalogie, une chaîne morale qui relie la femme actuelle au sédiment spirituel de son existence antérieure” (“intimate and secret relationship between these two apparently antithetical conditions, and even a genealogy, a moral chain that connects woman today to the spiritual sediment of her previous existence”). The indispensable core of women originates from her female ancestors.

Khatibi and Derrida’s theoretical concepts of “devenir” (“in the process of becoming”) and “passe-partout” respectively, help elucidate Béji’s proposition. Just as memory represents an ongoing process of “devenir” and “passe-partout” that allows room for constant “working” in painting, women’s true identity can only emerge at the crossroads of ancient and modern. Mignolo and Schiwy’s claim that identity represents both a “state” and “movement” also contributes to explaining Béji’s argument. Future women can openly embrace tradition as part of the continuous evolution of their identity. In fact, women today already carry within themselves a “débris d’un univers englouti,

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651 Béji, *Une force* 69.

652 Béji, *Une force* 54.
l’essence de cet univers féminin, le génie du quotidien, la rêverie créatrice, la vie contemplative, le séjour de la demeure” (“debris of an engulfed universe, the essence of this feminine universe, the genius of everyday life, the creative daydream, the contemplative life, the visit home”) that coincide and reflect their ancient yet changing heritage.\textsuperscript{653}

As Béji’s analysis of traditional women shows, the potential of future women lies within a transgenerational inner force. Internally, women possess an invisible metaphysical strength that prepares them for a transcendental destiny: a spirituality that will help them maintain a global picture of their existence.\textsuperscript{654} Béji perceives women’s “mysterious” inner strength to be a universal and unchanged force that has lasted throughout history.\textsuperscript{655} To illustrate women’s spirit of perseverance, Béji refers to the paintings of Vermeer and Rembrandt. The two painters portray young and elderly women from the seventeenth century in postures of reflection. Light appears to emanate from the bodies of the posed women, revealing the “soul, charm, and authority” that reunite them to present day women within the “depth of their interior world.”\textsuperscript{656}

As indicated earlier, Béji identifies a particularly timeless quality in women’s strength and vitality as she considers Vermeer’s \textit{The Milkmaid}. The painting illustrates a “contemplative feminine dimension” that Béji recalls from her own experiences in the kitchen of her childhood home: “cette réalité intérieure dont il fixait l’apparition” (‘[Vermeer’s] immobilization of the appearance of this interior reality”). The work

\textsuperscript{653} Béji, \textit{Une force} 112-13.

\textsuperscript{654} \textit{Une force} 105.

\textsuperscript{655} \textit{Une force} 55.

\textsuperscript{656} Béji, \textit{Une force} 63.
contains such depth of meaning for women universally that Béji feels that she is a sibling of the painted “opalescent sisters.” In fact, she perceives an unraveled form of religiosity within the painting that encompasses an essence of spirituality true to all humans where: “religion se défaîsait sans se détruire” (“religion undid itself without destroying itself”). In the same way, Béji perceives an undone and more natural appearance of women that reflects more than Muslim or traditional women. They appear instead as a series of interlinking “interiors.” Rather than portraying the nostalgia of a lost world, the inside views of femininity reveal an intimate reality of women that transcends time, space, and beliefs: Béji’s concept of a “vital transfigure.” Just as Rembrandt and Vermeer have discovered and communicated the timeless glory of femininity through everyday scenes, ancient women have fought their battles and demonstrated timeless intelligence even while fulfilling the tradition of “servitude.”

Reconciliation and joined forces between ancient and modern women also represent Béji’s solution to the present and future problems concerning their place in the social, political, and economic realms. Instead of fearing the former space of woman—the home—as a place of “domestic slavery,” women need to realize that domestic and creative activities will continue to coexist within the home. Through women’s concerted efforts to “reconcile the ancient and new,” they will find the “secret of [their] creative life.” In order to underline the equilibrium that exists between the ancient and modern, Béji concludes that women’s “nature” and “mind” will ultimately complement each

657 Béji, Une force 66-67.

658 Béji, Une force 65.

659 Béji, Une force 54.
other. Likewise, women’s inner spiritual identity in gender and humanity represents the way in which they will contribute to “comment rendre le monde plus humain” (“how to make the world more human”). Tunisian women in the twenty-first century enjoy liberation from the condition of submission due to the efforts of feminists who have assured their intellectual equality. Yet they must now live freedom as a “creative act of the mind” by fostering and maintaining the strength of tradition passed on from within.

Béji offers significant insight into the circumstance of Tunisian women both in the traditional and modern realms. Yet the weakness of her arguments lie in the premature conclusions that she makes about the social groups in her nation and in the inapplicability of her analysis to other countries in which women have yet to acquire a comparable atmosphere of emancipation and equality to men. By acknowledging how troubled she feels when she encounters women in Tunisia who still live in a position of submission, she implies that not all Tunisian women yet enjoy the freedom from a domestic “despotic order.” Having a vocational choice between the public and the private spheres indicates a position of liberation. Yet how many women in Tunisia’s neighboring countries truly have access to this form of liberty?

660 Une force 145-47.

661 Béji, Une force 160-61.

662 Béji, Une force 152.

663 Given that the post-independence policy on family law in Morocco followed the patrilineage according to the “Islamic family law of the Shari’a,” the “content of the law and women’s legal status thus were left essentially unchanged” (Charrad 147). In turn, although Algerian women initially resisted the government’s plan to adopt a “conservative family law” comparable to the one in Morocco, the final “Algerian Family Code” also followed the patrilineage system “in which male kin have privileges and men have power over women” (Charrad 170).

664 Une force 152-53.
When Béji suggests that the social order in Tunisia has reversed itself such that men now have “adopted the mentality of the dominated,” she once again makes a sweeping generalization about her society. What would a survey on the social, economic, political, and academic ladders show regarding the positions that men and women fill in Tunisia today? Béji suggests that women in the private sector have proved themselves to “reign as mistresses” and have reversed the order of authority by dictating the life of the home. Yet as Béji points out, the circumstance still confines women to the same existence rather than offering them new change. It remains too early to claim that women have already reached equality to men, particularly on the global level. Instead of renouncing women’s position of influence and power in the public realm, Béji and her contemporaries can still help women attain a level of education and enlightenment that would ensure their access to human rights. The liberation process for women remains a work in progress—a project “in the process of becoming”—rather than an accomplished product.

Even with the benefits of living in a culturally in-between position, Béji also acknowledges the dilemma that she has personally confronted at the intersection of two cultural and generational mindsets. First, she feels the need to sacrifice the memory of the old in order to efficaciously make place for the new. By doing so, she would obliterate the “joyful ghosts of her childhood” and feel more liberated. Yet she would simultaneously feel burdened by a shadow that forbids her from returning to the daydreams of the past for fear that they may “aloudir la course de [son] être désincarné” (“weigh down the race of her unreal self”). Next, she wonders if she might be reacting

665 Béji, Une force 38.
against a society that has advanced beyond her comfort. She is unwilling to accept the responsibility that requires superhuman power as the new generation attempts to replace the old.\footnote{666 Béji, Une force 98.} Also, although Béji does not see herself as "passive," she does not feel that she fits into the role of "conqueror" or "fighter." She believes that such pre-constructed images of present day women displace their authentic qualities.\footnote{667 Une force 103.}

The climax of Béji’s appeal to women in Une force reveals her tentative attitude toward women who are determined to leave the home in order to embrace a new position of power in the political world. She insists that women should exercise their true inner strength by not accepting the position of power that has become available to them: "La puissance de la femme est le refus de la puissance" ("The power of woman is the refusal of power"). Moreover, she believes that rather than exercising a "force qui va" ("strength that goes"), women must seize the "force qui demeure" ("force that stays/dwells").\footnote{668 Béji, Une force 174.} Instead of going out to occupy the exterior, women should stay and continue to reside in the home.\footnote{669 Through this word play, Béji clearly stresses the values of the traditions associated with the "archaic" woman. Instead of rejecting the past in an effort to forget the associated "douleur" ("pain") and "angoisse" ("anguish"), the contemporary woman must recognize that she signifies the "aboutissement d’une résistance archaïque" ("outcome of an archaic resistance"; Béji, Une force 159-60). This "archaic resistance" represents the "force qui demeure" ("force that stays"); the staying power that woman has always possessed and passed down through the generations to the modern woman (Béji, Une force 174).} Women will deliver humanity from its downfall with her enduring interior strength and by preserving the sanctuary of the home. Béji identifies the dissatisfaction of women in their pursuit of independence, in their
dissociation from the home, and in consequently losing the opportunity to “create life” for humanity.\textsuperscript{670}

Yet Béji’s call to women to decline the power available to them outside of the home proves problematic, particularly since knowledge equals power. In 	extit{Une force}, she even condemns the deprivation of women’s education by considering it to be the most shameful gesture that man can make to the “nobility and dignity of man himself.”\textsuperscript{671}

Moreover, her own modern educational foundation gives her the ability to analyze the condition of women today. If she had rejected academics—thus refused intellectual power—she and many feminist scholars would never have been able to defend women’s equality over the twentieth century. Although Béji acknowledges that even illiterate women have been aware of their oppressed state and continue to think independently despite their lack of education, she overlooks how much more power that educated women (like herself) have to influence and promote social changes that can help other women acquire the right to equality and education. Without the active pursuit and exercise of the power of knowledge, where would women be?

Moreover, if hegemonic feminism forms overly generalized assumptions of the condition of women in developing nations, could Béji be equally inclined to create exaggerated images of modernist feminists? Are Occidental feminist as isolated and inhumanly aggressive as Béji suggests? By developing her awareness of the divergent positions of Western feminist theorists, she may draw different conclusions about them. Influential scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Susan Moller Okin offer crucial

\textsuperscript{670} Béji, 	extit{Une force} 165.

\textsuperscript{671} Béji, 	extit{Une force} 42.
cross-cultural insights within social, political, and economic sectors that encourage transcultural awareness.\textsuperscript{672} By dispelling inaccurate conclusions of modernist feminists, Béji could join in the effort to promote solidarity among women globally in an effort to protect human rights appropriate to the given sociocultural contexts.

Nevertheless, Béji raises a valuable point that re-evaluates the significance of tradition in order to provide women with wisdom about their current circumstance and the future contributions that they can potentially make to society. By drawing on the strength and knowledge of the foremothers, modern women can grasp the baton and continue the efforts of helping to improve the condition of humanity. Moreover, Béji relevantly argues that the life within the home represents an irreplaceable foundation of society that neither woman nor man can abandon. Men and women alike must continue to play a part in creating life and ensure its liberated development. Through a concerted and persistent effort, a new humanity will materialize where every member, regardless of gender, class, or race, could equally contribute to promoting and living out a true spirit of liberty.

Aware of the unsettling sentiments of dispossession and displacement that afflict the people of Tunisia, Béji turns to writing to examine and communicate the causes of this condition. Lacking a national history, her fellow “decolonized” citizens turn to culture in order to restore a sense of national identity. Yet a chaotic jumble of superficial

cultural constructions flood the country leaving Tunisians feeling uprooted within their homeland. In order to dispel this false image of nationality, Béji seeks to understand her cultural identity by re-examining the foundations of her youth. *L’œil* illustrates this exploration of the past and the rediscovery of the cultural spaces of the grandmother’s home and the city of Tunis.

Through a renewed perspective of domestic life, Béji uncovers foundational elements of Tunisian culture. While recounting the lifestyle of the grandmother, the narrator redeems the security of the home and the moral virtues of tradition. Subsequently, she makes a sociocultural critique by which she compels Tunisians to reconsider the strengths of their ancestors. Rather than dismissing the traditional lifestyle of women as obsolete and irrelevant to contemporary life, modern women must still embrace the “force qui demeure” (“force that stays/dwells”) that has preceded them. Without the reparative atmosphere of the sanctuary-home, the people of Tunisia would remain orphans, fatigued by the exhausting commotion of misleading cultural fabrications and disorienting pressures of modernization.

Béji’s discerning viewpoint on her nation’s problematic sociocultural conditions originates from her transcultural upbringing. By drawing from her plural background, she offers a transductive perspective that sees beyond cultural boundaries and generational timeframes. In particular, she perceives discontentment among her female contemporaries. She sees them suffering from an identity crisis due to their rejection of the traditional woman. Through the noble character of the grandmother in *L’œil*, Béji stresses the irreplaceable value of tradition that has been passed down by the ancient women of Tunisia. Moreover, by contrasting the genuine existence and conduct of the
grandmother to the superficial elitist women of the Neptune restaurant, Béji questions the objectives and practices of the latter group.

The debate between the traditional and the modern mentalities thus becomes a focal point in *L'œil* that Béji further addresses in *Une force*. In the latter text, she confronts Western feminist scholars who maintain a hegemonic stance on the debate between modernists and traditionalists. Rather than perceiving Oriental traditional women as weak, oppressed, and ignorant, Occidental modern women must reconsider the original strength, influence, and intelligence of all women of antiquity. Before modern women can reinvent a stable coherent self, they need to rebuild their identity upon the solid platform established by their female ancestors. Béji suggests that the preservation of tradition can assure the salvation of culture. As a supporter of a new feminism that upholds tradition, she invites modernists to return to the fundamental values of tradition. Moreover, when women and men of Tunisia join in the common effort to reconstruct their society on the unshakeable foundation of tradition, they will experience the rebirth of a new identity, existing in a true state of freedom by which they will no longer live as orphans to their past.
-- Conclusion --

Deliverance

As the three chapters aimed to show, Baya, Cixous, and Béji use creative means to transcend a complicated past. Through the media of painting and writing, they explore their origins—a disconnected heritage, a lost homeland, and abandoned cultural traditions—in order to reinvent the self. Moreover, these women give new perspective to disregarded, paradoxical, or problematic realities linked to their sociocultural circumstance and identity. Born in North African countries and brought up in transcultural settings, they view the world from a transceptive eye that permeates the conventional boundaries of time, gender, and culture. Moreover, psychoanalytical explorations of their works reveal the manifestations of the underlying influences of the subconscious: a transceptive awareness of the inner self.

In addition to identifying parallels among the paintings and writings of the three women, this paper sought to recognize the “singularity” of each individual. Experiences and circumstances specific to each woman’s past shape the content of her artworks or texts. With different creative approaches—e.g. semi-abstract figures, neologisms, and descriptive metaphors—they address and communicate the traumatic events or sociopolitical crises that are specific to their given situations. As a concluding overview of the personal stories of Baya, Cixous, and Béji will show, they follow unique trajectories that converge in the common project of recreating identity.

As the details of Baya’s biography reveal, the extraordinarily humble upbringing of the artist partly informs the development of her original artwork. Born in the destitute region of Kabylie in Algeria and living in impoverished conditions, she loses both parents to illness. Transferred to the care of her grandmother, she continues to endure a meager
existence. It is when Baya moves in with her adoptive French mother Marguerite that she could fully pursue her interest in art. With Marguerite’s help, she acquires the opportunity to paint and becomes acquainted with other artists. From a psychoanalytical perspective, painting offers Baya a form of therapy that assists her in dealing with her bereavement. When she states that she can forget everything while painting, she is describing the liberating effect of creative expression. By inventing scenes filled with an abundance of vibrant flora, fauna, and women, she ultimately chases away the sadness and loneliness that she had suffered in her past. In works where she illustrates a mother embracing a child, she fulfills the subconscious desire of returning to the arms of her prematurely lost mother.

Baya’s gouaches reflect boldness and multi-thematic motifs that eclipse the hardships of her youth. While a psychoanalytical investigation of the colors, decorations, and figures could offer more thorough interpretations of Baya’s artwork, literary and art critics perceive a “lost paradise,” the stories of Scheherazade, and the arabesque design of Islamic art. Pellégrini, Breton, and Maubert claim that her works depict a mysterious world that combines Arabia with Paradise. The colors and images that suggest scenes from Ancient Egypt, Crete, and Sumer, remind Pellégrini and Breton of arabesque art. Yet the pictures also depict imaginative settings and narratives that convey stories from Mille et une nuits or from Genesis. Then, her elaborative decoration and ornamentation suggest the tradition of calligraphic Islamic Art. And for the Algerian-born feminist writer Assia Djebar, the women in Baya’s post-marriage paintings portray a “combat de femme.”

Critics offer stylistic and thematic interpretations of Baya’s pictures, but they tell more about their own experiences and political ambitions than those of the artist.
Nonetheless, the commentaries offer helpful insight into the plural features of Baya’s artwork. For example, Khatibi identifies a “bi-pictura” quality of her paintings that reveals her transcultural background. Instead of fitting into a particular art tradition, her works portray a combination of artistic approaches that render her compositions unclassifiable. With her imaginative use of color, shapes, semi-abstract figures, and intricate detail, she blends oriental, occidental, realistic, and abstract art techniques in a way that portrays a transceptive vision.

Baya’s innovation thus provokes considerable dialogue and open-ended reflection among her commentators about her origins or about the symbolic meaning of her works. Yet they overlook another significant function of her paintings: a means to recreate identity. With a childhood destabilized by constant transition, Baya lacked a clear sense of heritage or foundation. Instead of resigning herself to the uncertainty of her orphanhood, she finds resolution in her artwork. She actively overcomes her hardships by pursuing painting. Although she loses most of her connections to her heritage, she finds herself released from the hindering cultural condition of “bidaa.” Subsequently, the world of painting represents her “Ka’aba”—a creative sanctuary—where she could reclaim a new identity. Baya thus achieves what Khatibi states to be the “dream of a painter”: she finds her second birth in art. Even as an orphan living in a patriarchal system, she attains international recognition as an accomplished female Algerian painter.

Similar to Baya’s story, Cixous’s biography also reveals that she had prematurely lost her father to illness and had lived in the misery of a war-torn birthplace. Witnessing relentless violence and anti-Semitic discrimination, she never felt at home in her homeland despite her efforts to “arrive” there. Fighting battles daily, she watched
hypocrisy and hatred divide neighborhoods, friends, and families. Like Baya, she longed to escape and forget the hardships that had plagued her childhood. She attains this liberation by finally leaving Algeria, never expecting to return there either in person or in thought. Yet an ever-present longing for her birthplace pushes her to rewrite and to reconcile herself with her difficult past.

Cixous’s *Les rêveries de la femme sauvage* (*Les rêveries*) illustrates the challenging process of re(dis)covering the forgotten memories of an inaccessible birthplace. From a psychoanalytical standpoint, the fragmented stories, recurring disjointed themes, and a-chronological narrative expose the dynamics of remembering. The semi-autobiographical text follows a storyline that fluctuates between memory and oblivion thus conveying the wandering movements of a daydreaming mind. At the same time, repeated images and phrases indicate the cyclic pattern of the narrator’s anamnesis as she stubbornly seeks to recall the past.

The unpredictable activities of the narrator’s subconscious yield an erratic collection of signs: Fips, Bike, Book, Clinic, Clos-Salembier, Algiers, and Aïcha. Each motif designates a significant aspect of the narrator’s past and becomes a vital organ in her story of Algeria. Fips symbolizes the “transfigure” of both the narrator and her family. Chained, encaged, and left defenseless, the dog’s pitiful life summarized the circumstance of the household amidst the treachery and violence that ravaged their existence. The Bike represents the brother’s “Key-thing” that allows him to discover his birthplace. In turn, the Book becomes the narrator’s wings of evasion from the country’s wartime anarchy. Filled with deception and hostility, Algiers and Clos-Salembier signify cities of Hell filled with interminable fighting. In contrast, the mother’s maternity Clinic
represents a sanctuary of birth that housed the best of Algeria while the narrator’s nanny Aïcha incarnated the desired “femme sauvage” (“woman of the wild”):673 the personified Algeria after which the narrator desperately sought. Among the symbolic images, the most striking and repeated vision is that of a divided body or entity. Ranging from the horrific memory of the mouse’s severed body to the anecdote of the sacrificial doves, the narrator communicates her own deplorable state of being “inséparable”: the intolerable yet inescapable relationship that she has with her identity. Excluded by the “Français français” and Arabs due to her Jewish non-Arab background, she lived a double existence her entire time in Algeria.

Yet as the narrator uncovers the disconcerting realities of her past, she portrays a transceptive view that crosses perspectives and unveils realities unnoticed by others. Seeing beyond the puppetry and disguises that characterized “Algériefrançaise,” she exposes truths that smelled of “human excrement.”674 She also narrates Les rêveries from multiple viewpoints thus giving the semi-autobiographical account a plural and cross-gendered voice. In turn, due to Cixous’s microscopic vision, she exemplifies myopic transceptivity. Able to perceive reality from up close, she portrays scenarios and images with significant detail. With her skillful use of poetic language, symbolic description, wordplay, and neologisms, she thus builds her “kingdoms of details.” By creatively transcending and re-membering her otherwise inexpressible childhood experiences, she rewrites her past and finally arrives home in Algeria. She adopts a new figurative

673 Aresu 239.

homeland within a “nationalité littéraire” (“literary nationality”) and discovers a rebirth—her “right birth”—in writing.

Although Béji does not claim a literary nationality, she uses writing to prove herself as an engaged intellectual who identifies the unnoticed realities of her homeland, Tunisia. As her background reveals, she enjoys a transcultural upbringing where she could observe a household that peacefully practiced different religious and cultural traditions. By receiving an education in both Tunisian and French academic institutions, she also learns to think in the Orient and express herself in the Occident. Rather than feeling divided by the two sides of her identity, she perceives them as “inseparable twins” who remain mutually inclusive. She consequently develops a transjective awareness by which she identifies and analyzes the values and paradoxes of Tunisian and French societies.

In the semi-autobiographical novel *L'œil du jour* (*L'œil*), Béji’s transpectivity helps her to develop several themes central to both the domestic and public spheres of her life in Tunis. By focusing on the grandmother, the childhood residence, the city life in Tunis, and the women of the Neptune restaurant, the narration underlines the principal topics that concern the narrator. The grandmother symbolizes the sustainer of ancient tradition that many generations of women have passed down before her. Likewise her home signifies the protective domestic space that she maintains with the distinguished intelligence and authority of her foremothers. In contrast, the polluted streets and abandoned dwellings of Tunis epitomize the deteriorating remnants of a neglected heritage. Moreover, the women of Neptune represent the intellectual advocates of modernization who reject the values of antiquity.
Such metaphoric profiling of the people and city of Tunis signals the critical eye with which the narrator examines her birthplace. The grandmother symbolizes ancient tradition, the home signifies a domestic refuge, urban life illustrates the society’s disintegrating heritage, and the women of Neptune epitomize modernist feminists. _L’œil_ thus re-evaluates forgotten cultural values of Tunisian society while also critically reconsidering the emerging icons of the modernizing generation. The novel also offers an artist’s eye that gives new meaning to commonplace details or unchallenged dichotomies. For example, the narrator notices the delicate colors that passers-by overlook in the streets of Tunis and she exposes the aesthetic and symbolic significance hidden within them. In turn, her transective descriptions of conventionally distinct spaces or individuals make them appear fluid or interchangeable. Béji consequently advocates the restoration of her nation’s archaic foundations while also introducing a new order of beauty and symbolism.

Such insightful critical and artistic perspectives of _L’œil_ then reappear in Béji’s essay _Une force qui demeure (Une force)._ In the latter text, Béji pursues the traditionalist versus modernist feminist debate that she sets up in _L’œil_ between the grandmother and the Neptune women. Referring again to the grandmother as the icon of antiquity, she argues the importance of reclaiming the enduring strength of tradition and challenges the disorienting movement of modernist feminists. In her analysis of Vermeer’s _The Milkmaid_, she engages her artistic sensitivity as she illustrates the unchanging beauty and value of women’s traditional domestic space. Perceiving the strengths of ancient Tunisian cultural tradition within the European seventeenth-century painting, she urges contemporary feminists to embrace the traditions of their foremothers. While supporting
the feminist spirit of emancipation, Béji also states that women’s power has remained within themselves since antiquity. By rediscovering ancient values, modern women will feel the original density of their bodies and truly live in the spirit of liberty.

The personal histories and accomplishments of Baya, Cixous, and Béji show that the divergent origins of these women inspire them to express or address themes and issues specific to their sociocultural context. Although different motivations determine the aim of their contributions to the worlds of art and literature, their liberated creativity gives all three the opportunity to produce original works and ideas. Despite the traumatic events that afflict their pasts, they transcend the obstacles that would hinder their creativity: bidaa, the limits of memory and language, and the conformist mentality of social structures. Out of personal conviction or due to the unique circumstances of their past, they succeed in breaking away from the confines of pre-designated systems.

In Baya’s case, her premature orphanhood and extreme poverty forces her into the circumstance of starting below ground zero. Yet since she no longer belonged to a specific tradition, she acquired the boundless liberty to recreate an imaginary world and identity for herself. She learns to exercise her creative freedom with the encouragement and support of Marguerite. Not needing to conform to convention or tradition, Baya demonstrates her talent and inventiveness by giving new meaning and perspective to the basic elements of painting. Her works thus appear timeless and mystify critics who struggle to interpret and situate her work within a specific category of art. Baya’s gouaches consequently remain a model of hope for individuals who desire to similarly break free from the frames of convention in order to rediscover autonomy and visibility.
For Cixous, her earlier texts explain her conviction to transgress the Laws of the literary world and to embrace a liberated form of writing. Reacting to the misogynistic attitude that she had experienced during her studies in France, she promoted a "new insurgent writing." Urging women to mold language into a new transgressive form that would defy the phallocentric literary tradition, Cixous becomes a prominent figure among French feminists of the 1970s.675 A quarter of a century after this revolutionary appeal to women writers, she continues to exemplify insurgent writing in Les rêveries. Yet beyond taking a feminist stance in Les rêveries, she focuses on addressing her complex origins. The thematic shift shows how Cixous’s convictions evolve with the development of her emergent identity. In Les rêveries, Cixous transforms language not only to defy the conventions of writing, but also to articulate the unspeakable realities of her past and to come home to Algeria in literature.

Béji also turns to writing in order to exercise her creativity. Like Cixous, she enjoys an upbringing that opposed patriarchal oppression and ensured her education. She consequently learns to value and practice autonomy and critical thinking. Yet her origins and motivations differ from Cixous’s. Writing from a sociologist’s perspective, she analytically studies and comments on the sociocultural crises afflicting Tunisia. In L’œil, she re-evaluates the lifestyle and cultural foundations of her society. The text particularly pushes for the reconsideration of the position of modernist feminists who disregard the importance of tradition that former generations of women have established. Continuing with the debate between traditionalists and modernists in Une force, she supports a form of enlightened traditionalism. This alternative position combines the values of tradition

with the feminist spirit of emancipation in order to restore a stable and truly liberated modern identity to women. By re-immersing themselves into the ancient, they are born again as genuinely modern women: “immersion dans l’ancien, cette seconde peau où l’on meurt pour renaitre” (“immersion into the ancient, the second skin where one dies to be born again”).

While the backgrounds of Baya, Cixous, and Béji reveal the origins of their independent creativity, their accomplishments inspire others with transnational histories to similarly surmount the obstacles that disorient their sense of identity. As the chapters have illustrated, individuals with complex backgrounds appear unclassifiable within social conventions that seek to define and categorize. Yet the truth of their identity, much like the “truth in painting,” resides in the overlooked space of “passe-partout” instead of within the confines of a frame. Through creative spaces like art and literature, they can reinvent a borderland and deliver the rebirth of their right birth.

As this study has argued, the first step toward unraveling the mystery of multidimensional subjectivities is by recognizing the “play” within structures and making a social renovation that accounts for an undesigned interstitial space. Transcultural individuals occupy the fluid crossroads region that transcends the frames and dichotomies of gender, culture, and language. It is the “Ka’aba” for Baya’s gouaches of “bipictura,” for Cixous’s unclassifiable writings, and for Béji’s “deux jumelles

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inséparables” ("two inseparable twins"). When visual and literary artists and critics together adopt the transpective vision, they will converge at the "Ka’aba.” The former will embrace a liberated creativity by which they will artistically reinvent their plural identities. And the latter will understand and preserve the singularity of the creators and their creations.


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