

Rewriting Memory, (Re)inventing Identity in *Les rêveries de la femme sauvage*

C. Wakaba Futamura

Rice University

While no simple explanation exists for how the mind processes memory, in *Leur pesant de poudre: romancières francophones du Maghreb* Marta Segarra examines how some novels choose to depict the experience of remembering. In many cases, a flashback might appear as a “process that is set off abruptly.”¹ A smell, an image, or a sound can activate a sudden resurrection of the past (Segarra, *Leur pesant* 43). Moreover, despite the opposing characteristics of memory and oblivion, an “intrinsic relationship” exists between the two as Vera Lucia Soares indicates. Lingering as “impressions” or “traces,” memory bears the marks of erosion that oblivion leaves behind (Soares 288). Another complicating factor associated with remembering regards how it can become a source of comfort or despair depending on the type of past that an individual has endured. Segarra points out: “The obscuring of memory is therefore as feared as, at times, desired because this [circumstance] could shut [out] the wounds that memories revive” (*Leur pesant* 43-44). In cases where memories haunt the present, an individual might want to evoke the past as a form of “exorcism”: “[I]n order to get rid of them, it is necessary to revive them again one last time” explains Segarra. Finally, as this paper aims to demonstrate, remembering can also play a restorative role by “strengthening” the sense of self (Segarra, *Leur pesant* 45).

As an “exercise of the imagination” that can help to recover memory, writing represents the activity of choice for Hélène Cixous (Segarra, *Leur pesant* 47). Throughout her semi-autobiographical book *Les rêveries de la femme sauvage*,² she reinforces the principal theme of trying to “arrive” in Algeria where “arrival” metaphorically signifies being accepted as an “insider” of the country. The repeated efforts of the narrator to “arrive” in this way prove to be futile as they become exacerbated by the volatile sociopolitical circumstance of a nation that is battling for independence. Born in Algeria with French nationality and a Spanish-Moroccan-German-Slovakian Jewish heritage, she experiences discrimination, rejection, injustice, and hatred, and can only think of escaping this “hell of paradise” (Cixous, *Les rêveries* 121).

As a child, having only the house and backyard to play in, the narrator turns to books as her wings of evasion. Climbing up into a tree, she loses herself in the pages of a novel thinking, “I will leave, I will leave all Algeria Clos-Salembier behind me, I will never again return, even in thought . . . in reading, and in the exaltation of reading . . . I will never suffer again . . .” (Cixous, *Les rêveries* 79). Thus forgetting the misery around her through the liberty of her imagination, she finds a type of sanctuary in literature. While this mental diversion temporarily rescues her from the chaos of her everyday existence, she chooses to physically leave Algeria in 1955 with no intention to return. Abandoning her birthplace, she never thought that she would write about the life that she had spent there. This nation appeared to her as a “tall closed off whiteness,” an impermeable wall, a closed book (Cixous, *Les rêveries* 167).

This determination to forget the past holds firm for forty years until the narrator hears a familiar “memory of a dream of a bark” (Cixous, *Les rêveries* 167). The distant cry reminds her of her family dog Fips and motivates her to confront the conflicting yet pressing need to remember everything she had left behind. Thus her story begins the day that oblivion yields to memory. As Cixous recomposes her “rêveries,” writing functions as a weapon of defense against forgetting: a form of “anti-oblivion” (“De la scène” 22).

Cixous thus opens the closed book of Algeria in an attempt to rewrite her past. By starting her narrative with the words, “[t]he entire time that I was living in Algeria I dreamed of arriving one day in Algeria,” she already reveals the challenge that awaits her on this mental journey back in time (Cixous, *Les rêveries* 9). Given the adversity that she had faced during her upbringing in Algeria, this process initiates the reopening of wounds just as Segarra had suggested. Scraping away the opaque coating of oblivion in order to expose the repressed memories underneath, she must tolerate a painful revisiting of the past. Yet even in reawakening these hardships, she initiates a “reparative process”—an “exorcism”—that begins to ease the suffering (Rye 142).³

In *Or: les lettres de mon père*, Cixous introduces the word “oubliere”: “to resuscitate-erase” (16). This “resuscitating-erasing” process, that informs the motivation behind *Les rêveries*, becomes a recurring theme in the book. One night in July, the narrator experiences an “abrupt” unleashing of memories of various moments lived in Algeria. While the trigger of this flood of images and scenes remains unclear, the narrator describes this unique incident as entering into the part of her memory that she calls the “Oblivion gallery.” This unexpected entry into Oblivion results in a deluge of words that she frantically transcribes onto paper. Like an enlightened scribe, she writes

what the “Comer” or the “gift of gods” dictates to her. This episode represents the long-awaited moment of “arrival” in Algeria (Cixous, *Les rêveries* 9-10).

However, even this instance of revelation encounters its defeat when the narrator later realizes that she had misplaced the memories that she had painstakingly recorded. Although she had managed to recover the first half page of the five she had written that night, the rest fall back into the void of oblivion. Finding herself in the ironic and pitiful circumstance of needing to start over from ground zero, she temporarily gives up on the frustrating task (Cixous, *Les rêveries* 12). Forty years later—as the ending of the book indicates—she responds again to the need to rewrite those lost memories by gathering together the remnants that she can still salvage.

As this reconstructive process of “memory” takes place, Cixous weaves together traces of scenes. Rather than following a clear chronological order, she gives the reader a thematic tour of incidents, images, and persons. Particular objects, places, and names—such as the Bike, the dog Fips, the Clinic, Françoise and Aïcha—recur throughout the book indicating the open-ended quality of the narrative. Moreover, the plural testimonies that Cixous includes in her text emphasize the collective effort of remembering. Although the narrator represents the principle voice of the book, the collaborative input of the brother and mother provides a more complete account of her story.

By making a collage of mental fragments, Cixous also sheds light on the dynamics of memory. The errant movement associated with the act of remembering symbolizes “the archetypal migration and wandering” as Soares notes (295). In fact, when the narrator elaborates on the difficulties of trying to “re-enter” what appear to her as the “invisible doors” of her childhood cities of Oran and Algiers, she compares her

situation to that of a blind individual. In order to “bring writing” to the thresholds of these doors in Algeria, she turns to all her senses except sight: “all that substitute for eyes, premonition, breath, ears of the heart, all the other organs endowed with sight, and fingertips” (Cixous, *Les rêveries* 48-49). Despite her dedicated efforts to relocate these imperceptible entrances, she makes little progress. Rather, the narrator discovers that she was “going in full speed, and not necessarily forward . . . she did not realize right away that she would not arrive [in Algeria]” (Cixous, *Les rêveries* 50).

This imagery of frantic searching illustrates what Soares considers to be the itinerant process of remembering. In order to recover the forgotten, the mind must roam between “present and past, between memory and oblivion” (Soares 295). While Soares perceives nomadic activity, Segarra identifies cyclic movement in Cixous’s book. By ending the story on the same words with which it opens, the narrator completes a circle. Remembering thus represents an ongoing quest of discovery that has no definite beginning or ending. This circular narration demonstrates what Segarra refers to as the “work of the unconscious, implicit in all efforts of anamnesis, of the summoning of memory necessary in autobiographical writing” (“Hélène Cixous” 192).

The “work of the unconscious” also explains the notion of “reveries” that Cixous includes in the title of her book. The series of interlinking fragments that compose her book reflects the activities of a contemplative mind. Open to the contributions of imagination, daydreaming imitates the fluidity of memories (Segarra, “Hélène Cixous” 192). In fact, Cixous reinforces the link between dreaming and writing by stressing that both can maintain a truth-seeking focus. In order to write sincerely, one must “write as [one] dream[s].” She explains this by claiming, “at night we don’t lie” (Cixous,

“Difficult Joys” 22).⁴ When truthful writing coincides with remembering, the resulting text becomes more than a nomadic or circular itinerary. Exposing a deeper reality, *Les rêveries* reveals the “odor of feces of human excrements” instead of simply portraying a “telluric perfume of Algeria” (Cixous, *Les rêveries* 83).

By “writ[ing] as [one] dream[s],” Cixous uncovers the stench of the forgotten and more importantly “arrive[s]” in Algeria. The wandering narration of *Les rêveries* not only indicates the complicated reconstruction process of memory, but also shows how the narrator hopes to repossess her subjectivity. Writing allows her to re-establish what Rye calls an “imaginative history” in order to “rebuild[] [an] inner world” (142).⁵ Although Rye does not expand on the sense of this “inner world,” the narrator discovers a liberating interior space in reading.

In turn, Cixous recreates an “imaginative history” by using innovative language. Through neologisms, word play, and metaphoric imagery, she rewrites childhood experiences as poetic depictions of the past. For example, in order to more accurately express her sentiments concerning Algeria, she introduces words such as “inséparable” (“insepArab”) and “Désalgerie” (“Des/DisAlgeria”). The former term “inséparable” (“insepArab”) signifies how the narrator suffers from an intolerable relationship that she has with her own indefinable identity (Cixous, *Les rêveries* 45). The latter word “Désalgerie” (“Des/DisAlgeria”), suggests what Segarra describes as the “desire” of knowing an inaccessible country: “désir d’Algérie” (“desire for Algeria”; Cixous, *Les rêveries* 21; Segarra, “Hélène Cixous” 187). These neologisms reflect the steps that Cixous takes to reinvent a personal history.

As Cixous names the formerly unnamable and comes to (new) terms with the hardships of her childhood years, she enjoys a figurative rebirth. In fact, through the “union” between “Oblivion” and “Memory,” she believes that individuals are “reborn at will” (Cixous, *Or* 17). By retelling her story of Algeria through creative means, she evokes what Abdelkhebir Khatibi envisions to be the dream of a painter: “to be born like and even 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” (22). By using lyrical sentences, Cixous demonstrates this imaginary “second birth.” She seeks to “complete[]” and “develop[]” her first birth by being born again through the productive act of writing. Like the “dream” of the painter, the “rêveries” of Cixous become the source of imaginative rewriting that induces the birth of a new self. Instead of remaining in the state of “dispossession” that she had felt while living in Algeria, she finds a double deliverance in literature (Cixous, *Les rêveries* 16). The literary space represents an “inner world”—an inner womb perhaps—in which Cixous finds salvation and by which she mothers a new identity.

The fragmented voices, images, and scenarios of *Les rêveries* indicate the battle that memory and oblivion have fought. On one hand, remembering becomes a painful quest. On the other, truthful rewriting proves to be a liberating act for Cixous. Nevertheless, through this literary tour of the past, Cixous—like the narrator—finally “arrives” in Algeria. At the end of the book, the narrator states that she feels “at home” in the very cities she had once feared: the sign of healed wounds. Even the places and instants that she had formerly fled or loathed have become a “vital transfigure” that she would never exchange for “any [other] sweet or moderate instant in the world” (Cixous,

Les rêveries 167). Likewise by rewriting memory, Cixous finds resolution: she reinvents her identity by adopting literature as her new “imaginary nationality” (Calle-Gruber and Cixous 207).

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¹ All quotations hereinafter are my translations unless otherwise indicated.

² Hereinafter I will refer to as *Les rêveries*.

³ Direct quote by Rye.

⁴ Direct translations by Wilcox et al.

⁵ Direct quote by Rye.

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LanguageLearningBase.com (short: llb.re) is an online community for learning foreign languages. It represents an open knowledge base. Every member can share and gain knowledge about a new language. Our facebook page Follow us on twitter RSS feed. Send feedback. Privacy policy. © 2020 Language Learning Base. Immigrant identities occupy the foreground in contemporary French films such as the anthology *Paris, je t'aime* (Paris) and *Entre les murs* by Laurent Cantet, signaling the changing cultural and ethnic faces that comprise the Hexagon. Yet the portrayal of East/Southeast Asians remains atemporal, confining them to the realm of the unassimilated other....
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