CHAPTER 5

Transtasting: An Essential Movement toward
La Chose Algérie

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Mon algériance, Tonalger, ToutAlger, néenalgérie, mon exalgériance, mon algirritation, mon algerrance, les algérêveries are but a few of the neologisms coined by Hélène Cixous and incorporated into her 2007 publication Si près to account for the effects of a central figure of her life and work: Algeria, the omnipresent – and thus haunting – presence of her birthplace. Whether pronounced or not, whether communicated through one of her cities, Oran or Algiers, Algeria has maintained a constant presence as backdrop, as stage, as character of the Cixousian oeuvre. These lexical creations have not only formed a very specific lexicon for the Cixousian reader, but are vital to the expression of the inaccessible sites of human experience toward which Cixous always ventures. Although not ghostwords per se – as they are not the result of “inadvertent errors made by copyist, printers and editors” (Cuddon 377) – this nomenclature nevertheless seems appropriate for two reasons: first, they have no real existence outside the Cixousian oeuvre; and second, within the literary, fictional sphere of Cixous’s creations, they carry the essence of what is not seen, what remains invisible. They, by their very formation, express that which is beyond conventional language.

These ghostwords illustrate, at the lexical level, an essential characteristic of Cixous’s entire writing/living enterprise, which itself is reinforced by yet another coined term: transtasting. Ironically, this term appears nowhere in writing. It is an auditory gem, only heard pronounced, as if by Freudian slip, during

1 Although all of these neologisms have been pulled from her 2007 publication, Si près, some already have referential status, as they were introduced in previous texts by Cixous. “Mon Algériance” for example is the title of an essay, published in Les Inrockuptibles in 1997.

2 In her “Hélène Cixous’s Imaginary Cities: Oran-Osnabrück-Manhattan – Places of Fascination, Places of Fiction,” Mireille Calle-Gruber specifically speaks of “haunted” books: “Algiers haunts two books and all the mother’s narratives and all the brother’s narratives” (136).

3 I am taking liberty here with Cuddon’s definition of ghostword, which in its initial meaning is genuinely a dated term. It refers specifically to words “which have no real existence” with regard to medieval texts. It was coined by W.W. Skeat, the great nineteenth-century editor.
a reading of her text, “Promised Cities,” presented in conjunction with Maria Chevska’s installation *Vera’s Room* at the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia in 2005. In explaining the importance of translation to her process of living and writing, Cixous distinctly pronounces the verb to *transtaste* in place of *translate*:

I never did anything but translate that is to say want to taste the taste of all the tastes, to *transtaste*, try all the words, invent new mixtures, bring extremes closer, go to the roots, return to the sources of sources, try other arts, exchange and taste other ways of *transtasting* and particularly painting, installing, other types of signifiers. (R 57:40 – my emphasis)

We will see that as a process, *transtasting* embraces at once the notion of a faithful translation (a *relevant* translation as understood in the English) and the transformative action that produces it (*relever*, as understood in the French). It leads the reader toward and through the impossible semiotic play so often noted in the composition of Cixous’s work that itself is reaching toward the impossible, the inaccessible, the untranslatable sites of existence. As suggested with the neologisms noted above, Algeria represents one such site for Cixous. She has struggled and continues to struggle, on several levels with determining and defining her birthplace (and its interior effects) in *Si près*.

The autobiographical refrain of being born in Algeria, yet never quite arriving in Algeria, is very familiar to the Cixousian reader. Be it in her 1989 essay, “Une virginité de mémoire,” her 1997 essay, “Mon Algériance,” her 2000 book publications, *Le jour où je n’étais pas là* and *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage*, or the aforementioned 2005 “Promised Cities,” the story of being born in Algeria, yet not arriving comes through: “[Algérie] était un autre lieu, une autre scène déjà. J’y étais, j’y suis née, je n’en étais pas” (‘Une virginité” 87). So present is this impossible predicament that the ghostword, *néenalgérie* is created for *Si près* (66). The anxiety caused by this impossibility and its constant presence

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4 Although Cixous is reading from a translation of her text done by Laurent Milesi, she often elaborates or makes cuts – at times significant ones. For this reason, the recording, which accompanies the published text, does not always correspond to the latter. Therefore, all references to the recording of her reading of “Promised Cities” are preceded by *R*, then followed by the minutes: the seconds. When the recording corresponds to the text, the page number suffices in referencing the source.

5 Both of these notions are explored in Jacques Derrida’s *Qu’est-ce qu’une traduction “relevante”?*, a text briefly referred to in “Promised Cities,” and one that I will further explore shortly.