A biographical entry on the Jewish-Algerian-French writer Hélène Cixous commands close attention to her work because, in her case, “life writing,” as she calls it, is a key topic for her imaginative and critical enterprise in the fields of poetic fiction, literary theory, feminist analysis, and the theater. Unlike any other contemporary writer, Cixous speaks with breathtaking precision about the myriad contradictions and consequences of “being Jewish” and “being a woman.” She subjects these parts of her existence to various, often radical, types of questioning and at the same time defines them as morally, politically, and poetically decisive for her life. Since she found so little space for such an exploration of cultural and sexual difference, she created new methods, institutions and words for this purpose. Noteworthy among her creations are the much-debated method of “feminine writing” as writing of the body, the DEA in Études Féminines at the University of Paris VIII, and the grammatical manipulation of words, such as “Jewoman,” which literally render the effects of cultural and sexual difference.

Hélène Cixous was born in 1937 in Oran, Algeria, a hybrid city “full of neighborhoods, of peoples, of languages,” which inspired one of her earlier poetic fictions, the bilingual Vivre l’orange/To Live the Orange. She was the first child of Eve Cixous, née Klein (b. 1910), a refugee from Osnabrück in Nazi Germany, and her husband Georges Cixous (1909–1948), whose ancestors had come to Algeria through the expulsion and trade routes from Spain and Morocco. Hélène’s father was a physician, who had written his dissertation on tuberculosis, to which he succumbed in 1948, thus turning into a figure of contradictory associations for his daughter. Her mother, Eve, took up midwifery to support her family. Known as “the ‘Arabs’ midwife” in Algiers,” she practiced until her expulsion with the last French doctors and midwives in 1971.

For Hélène Cixous, these circumstances of her genealogy, birth and life story, or, more precisely, the psychological and political conflicts inherent in these circumstances, were the seeds of her work: “My own writing was born in Algeria out of a lost country of the dead father and the foreign mother.” Playing with the “aberrant, extravagant” question of nationality became part of the diasporic lifelong exercise of their daughter Hélène, who “never thought I was at home [in Algeria], nor
that Algeria was my country, nor that I was French.” Instead, her adolescent experience of Algerian Jewishness made her realize that the logic of nationality was usually accompanied by such “unbearable behaviors” as colonialism or antisemitism. It also made her think of herself and her family in the provocative terms of a multiple alterity constituted by the logic of nationality, but which also undermines it with a form of speech seeking moral and political precision rather than authority: “How could I be from a France that colonized an Algerian country when I knew that we ourselves, German Czechoslovak Hungarian Jews, were other Arabs.”

During the years of her secondary education in Algiers and later in Paris, Cixous began to feel her foreignness in terms of a solitude brought about by political and institutional rather than existential reasons. She became keenly aware of the mechanisms of exclusion and interdiction based on cultural and sexual difference, and of their specific interactions with the logic of nationality. Thus, because of the restricted quota for Jews in Algerian schools, she was the only Jew in her class, or, because of the given structure of higher education, one of the few girls in a boys’ school. In 1955, she married Guy Berger (b. 1932). They left for Paris, where Cixous attended the khâgne (second preparatory year for university entry exams) at the Lycée Lakanal, in which she was the only North-African student in her class: “That is where I felt the true torments of exile [...] I was deported right inside the class.”

In 1956, Berger, who had obtained the CAPES (secondary school teaching diploma) in philosophy, was assigned a post in Bordeaux, where Cixous began to prepare the agrégation (highest level teachers’ exam) in English. Two years later, her first child, Anne-Emmanuelle, was born. The same year, Cixous obtained the CAPES in English and the agrégation soon thereafter. In 1959 Berger was drafted for military service in the Algerian war of independence and Cixous took up teaching at the Lycée of Arcachon. In 1960 she met Jean-Jacques Mayoux (1901–1987), with whom she began to work on a thesis on James Joyce and the aesthetics of exile, which would remain a central concern throughout her work. Her son Stéphane was born and died only a year later, in 1961. That same year, Pierre-François, her other son, was born. Her brother, Pierre, a medical student and a supporter of Algerian independence, was condemned to death by the OAS (Organisation Armée Secrète, the secret army organization in support of French rule in Algeria) and joined his sister in Bordeaux. Following Algeria’s independence in 1962, Eve Cixous and Pierre, who had hastily returned, were arrested. Hélène obtained their release with the help of Ahmed Ben Bella’s lawyer.

In the same year, she became assistant teacher at the University of Bordeaux. In Paris, she met the philosopher Jacques Derrida (b. 1930), another Jewish-Algerian-French intellectual, who would soon stir the academic world by launching a
controversial method of criticism and analysis known as “deconstruction.” Their talks on Joyce were the beginning of an intense friendship based on obviously shared, but also distinctly different, legacies, quests, and voices: Derrida’s “big” voice and her own “small” voice, as Cixous herself suggests in the translation of her mother’s former name, Klein, into an adjective of her own speech. This speech is indebted to the maternal and the minor, or, more precisely, to her mother’s maiden name and simple words and sentences, as well as to an analysis of the micro-aspects of social and mental life, such as feelings or everyday occurrences.

Since the 1990s Cixous and Derrida have continued their dialogue on life, genealogy, language and displacement in a number of co-authored books and texts on each other’s work. Significantly, these writings testify not only to the postmodern, metropolitan and celebratory elegance these rather different authors are oftencritically accused of. They also bear witness to the post-colonial, marginal, and disproportionate strategies for an ongoing de-colonization of the mind. They are a fledgling archive of contemporary Jewish-Algerian-French thought as it unfolds in an exchange between the sexes. Thus, they suggest a yet unexplored link between the formations of postmodernism and post-colonialism, which are usually said to be incompatible, if not mutually exclusive.

In 1963 Cixous made her first trip to the United States, where she did research on Joyce’s manuscripts. The same year Mayoux introduced her to Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), the major psychoanalytical theoretician, who was banned from the established institutions of psychoanalysis and would soon found a new school, the EFP (first called École Française de Psychanalyse, then École Freudienne de Paris). For the next two years Cixous worked with him regularly on James Joyce. She divorced Guy Berger in 1964 and a year later became assistant lecturer at the Sorbonne. In 1967, she published her first book of fiction, Le Prénom du Dieu (God’s First Name) and was appointed full professor at the University of Nanterre, albeit without a Ph.D.

From this ambiguous position, she became closely involved in the events of the students’ revolution in 1968. Edgar Faure, Minister of Education, charged her with creating the experimental university Paris VIII. Under Cixous’s influence, chairs were given to a number of exiled Latin-American writers and to such groundbreaking scholars as Gérard Genette (b. 1930), Tzvetan Todorov (b. 1939), Michel Foucault (1926–1984), and Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995). With Genette and Todorov, Cixous launched the journal Poétiquein 1968. That same year she defended her thesis on Joyce.

In 1969 Cixous obtained a Chair in English Literature at Paris VIII as well as the prestigious Prix Médicis for her second book of fiction, Dedans (Inside), which centers around her father’s death. In 1971 her mother was expelled from Algeria and came to
Paris with Hélène’s maternal grandmother, who had lived in Alsace before World War I and was thus entitled to a dual, German-French, citizenship. In 1974 Hélène Cixous set up the first doctoral program in women’s studies in Europe, the DEA in Études Féminines. She would have preferred a title alluding to sexual differences, but the Ministry of Education needed the exclusive and liberal reference to women’s concerns. The institutional development of this program during the last thirty years reflects the deplorable situation of late twentieth-century academic feminism in Europe: the DEA was frequently closed, usually by conservative governments, to be re-accredited only after international campaigns.

In 1975 Cixous wrote Portrait de Dora (Portrait of Dora), her first work for the theater, which garnered great success and ran for a year at the Théâtre d’Orsay. It presents a somewhat naïve revision of the male theatrics of female hysteria staged in Sigmund Freud’s compelling case history of “Dora.” Cixous’s apparent psycho-political naivety was radically dispelled that same year when she met Antoinette Fouque (b. 1936) the founder of the Women’s Liberation Movement in France in 1968 and of the feminist publishing house des femmes in 1973. Cixous opened her mind to Fouque’s psycho-political approach and entered the scene of the women’s movement and women’s history. Moreover, she decided to redefine herself morally and politically as a “Jewoman” (juifemme)—her own neologism that visibly doubles and splits her cultural legacy and position as subject along an ethnic-sexual axis. “By political choice,” she would publish all her subsequent books with des femmes.

From 1975 dates also the most seminal of Cixous’s texts on “feminine writing:” “The Laugh of the Medusa,” published in translation only a year later in the newly founded American feminist journal Signs. Here Cixous introduces her controversial idea of an insurgent, feminine-defined writing practice, which would subvert the dominant patriarchal system of exchange. In this system, she says, women are systematically deprived of their own cultural, psychic and sexual goods, while other forms of oppression based on, say, ethnicity, class, or race, thrive on women’s expropriation. The entrance of women’s “chaosmos of the personal” into the public sphere thus extends towards a larger model of social change.

During the next two decades Cixous’s international recognition reached new heights. In 1989 she received the Southern Cross of Brazil for her contribution to the international understanding of Brazilian literature, namely, the works of the Jewish-Russian-Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector (whom she had discovered in 1977 through the publication of one of Lispector’s works by des femmes). She received honorary doctorates from a number of European, Canadian and American universities, including Queen’s University, Ontario; Edmonton University, Alberta; York University, England; Georgetown University, Washington D.C.; Northwestern
University, Chicago; University of Wisconsin, Madison; and Saint Andrews University, Scotland. She delivered prestigious lectures in Europe and the United States, such as the Wellek Library Lecture at the University of California in Irvine in 1990 and the Amnesty International Lecture at Oxford University in 1993. In 1994 she received the Légion d’Honneur from François Mitterrand. Since 1995, she has been Distinguished Visiting Professor at Northwestern University in Chicago. An international colloquium on her works was held in June 1998 at Cerisy-la-Salle. That same year she received the Officier de l’Ordre National du Mérite.

During the 1980s and 1990s Cixous increasingly turned from poetic fiction to the theatre, and from a literary-feminist preoccupation with cultural and sexual difference and problems of selfhood to a political and often ethnographic focus on moments of crisis in the history of peoples, such as the Cambodians, the Greeks or the Chinese. It is as if she opened the lens of her microscopic view on life to the widest possible angle, or as if she globally disseminated her personal experience of Jewish and women’s history in terms of a multiple alterity through a troupe of performers.

Her renewed encounter with Ariane Mnouchkine, the director of Théâtre du Soleil, in 1982, was decisive in this respect. Precisely a decade earlier, Cixous and Mnouchkine, together with Michel Foucault, had put on blitz performances in front of prisons, which were regularly dispersed by the police. Mnouchkine now asked Cixous to write for her theater and its multi-national cast. With growing success, they staged a number of incomparable theatre productions in the following two decades. In 1989 they also collaborated on the film La Nuit Miraculeuse (The Miraculous Night), commissioned by the French National Assembly for the bicentennial of the Declaration of Human Rights (broadcast on FR 3, December 7, 1989).

Since the late 1990s Cixous’s writings have taken another turn, only apparently inconsistent with her turn to the theatre and its ethnographic and collaborative figuration. Now, in a series of autobiographic books, Cixous redefines the genre of autobiography in self-consciously ethnographic and collaborative terms. Thus she returns to the “primitive scenes” of her Algerian childhood in Reveries of the Wild Woman. In Osnabrück and other texts, equipped with a tape recorder, she becomes the ethnographer and ghostwriter of her “foreign mother’s” words and life story. In Portrait of Jacques Derrida As a Young Jewish Saint, she explores the Catholic impact on Jewish-Algerian-French autobiography as it transpires in Derrida’s and her own writing. And in Benjamin à Montaigne she gives her voice to the silenced story of her great-uncle Benjamin, who, disowned by his family, committed suicide and was erased from the family story. In all these cases, Cixous’s storytelling is shaped by the poetic-political duty to speak of what is silenced, unheard of, unspeakable, or said to
be better left unsaid.

In an as-yet untranslated book from 2002, Cixous poetically evoked Manhattan as the “primitive scene” of her literary life: Manhattan. Lettres de la préhistoire (Manhattan. Letters of Prehistory). In this personal response to the destruction of the Twin Towers she reconstructed her research trips to the United States from the mid-1960s while presenting Manhattan as a distinctly modern literary memory, an architectural form, a passion, a site of the real and of massive extinction, which calls for stories to be told on-site. In this latest “American” part of her work, Cixous shows yet again with her unequalled precision how the personal, the moral and the political interact in poetic storytelling and in the production and consumption of history.

**SELECTED WORKS BY HÉLÈNE CIXOUS**


Contains a chronicle of Cixous’s life, an extensive bibliography of her works, a number of critical essays, an interview on her conceptions of life and writing, as well as one of her major autobiographical texts, “Albums and Legends,” including pictures of her family members and a family tree of the Kleins.


Features a preface by Cixous, a foreword by Jacques Derrida, and translated selections from many of her works.


**Bibliography**

Discusses the notion of sexual difference in terms of body materiality and retraces its reception in American feminist theory.


Contains the lectures delivered at the international colloquium on Cixous’s work at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1998, including a larger opening essay by Jacques Derrida as well as a final debate. Documents the encounter between some of the major critics of Cixous, some of her outstanding students, and her main “collaborators,” such as Antoinette Fouque and Ariane Mnouchkine.


An introduction to the fictional, theatrical and critical writings of Cixous. Provides an account of Cixous’s theoretical position and an analysis of the recurring themes of her work, based on feminist and psychoanalytical insights. Contains an extensive bibliography of works by as well as on Cixous.


An account of the psycho-political nature of Cixous’s feminist, literary, critical and theatrical writings, focused on the politics of the body and the idea of a subversive, feminine economy.


The article problematizes Cixous’s position between postmodern and post-colonial concerns and offers a unique evaluation of Cixous’s seminal “Laugh of the Medusa” in these contexts.


Opens with an essay by Cixous, which addresses the poetic meaning of being Jewish. Features several articles exploring Cixous’s idea of “feminine writing.”