Jacques Derrida and His Algerian *Engagement*

COSANA NICOLAE ERAM

> Hence my characterization of the intellectual as exile and marginal, as amateur, and as the author of a language that tries to speak the truth to power. (Edward Said – *Representations of the Intellectual*)

Résumé: *L'étude vise les articulations complexes de l'identité algérienne de Jacques Derrida. Dans le contexte d'une réflexion critique plus large concernant le rôle des intellectuels français dans l'espace politique disputé en Maghreb, je me propose de voir la position – assumée vulnérable – de Jacques Derrida, qui laisse, en dernière instance, la réponse ouverte pour la manière dont les écrivains imaginent au présent «l'Algérie» : soit par une liaison active entre la population autochtone et celle colonisatrice, soit réécrite par une logique monolinguistique.*

Keywords: *ideology, identity, monolingualism, colonialism, transnationality*

In a poignant scene from *The Stranger* (1956) by Albert Camus, Meursault, the main character who unjustifiably murdered an Algerian man, receives a visit from Marie, his lover. As they talk, he gradually finds himself aloof and impermeable to her words and more attentive to the Arab dialogues around them. While his crime and life are treated in the book according to the terms of existentialist philosophy and not overtly related to the specific political implications of the situation in Algeria, Meursault's instantaneous linguistic "colonization" can significantly preface any discussion about identity, ideology, and language.

The paper elaborates upon the complex articulations of the opinions expressed by Jacques Derrida over the thorny issue of Algeria, his native land. My intention is to offer an insight into his social and political engagement and to signal the difficulty of his positioning. This allows me to consider his relation with ideology, taking the latter in the two meanings Louis Althusser assigned to it: as "a system of representations" images and concepts that impose themselves as "*structures*", through a process that escapes the control of the individuals; and as a means by which individuals make sense of their experience and conceive of their place in the world: "so ideology is a matter of the *lived* relation between men and their world. (...) In ideology men do indeed express the way they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence: this presupposes both a real relation and an *«imaginary» «lived»* relation" (233).

These elaborations formulate the two gestures I want to analyze in Derrida's attitude towards the Algerian question: firstly, his relation with his unstable and double sense of identity; and,

secondly, the strategies he deploys in order to come to grips with this problematic determinacy. That is, as James Kavanagh puts it, not only how this "lived relation with the real" creates in the individual's mind a determined picture of society, but also how their writing shows the struggle of the individual creating his/her place in it – in any case, leading to an active engagement in the construction of the individual's place. As Kavanagh stresses, "the ideological [is a] ...terrain where the social construction of reality is continually articulated with the constitution of the self" (353).

The war in Algeria (1954–1962) appears as a broken mirror that renders multiple and sometimes contradictory images to the observer today. Algeria was a special colony *(colonie de peuplement)* where the French families who settled there were regarded as Algerian. In the 1950s, the southern side of the Mediterranean Sea sheltered more than one million inhabitants of European origin, apart from the French military force. Nevertheless, even if Algeria was considered a part of France and not an overseas department, the colonizing system was based on ethnic and class discrimination in a land where one could encounter Berber, Arab, Maltese, Sephardic, Italian, and French populations. The revolt for the independence of Algeria started in 1954 when the National Liberation Front demanded that the French would leave and the country should have a free Arab government. In the war that lasted eight years six French prime ministers were replaced and the lives of colonizers and colonized were affected in equal terms. One of the main challenges for French intellectuals ever since has been related to their engagement, one way or another, in this fratricidal war presented by officials as a job of good will, nonetheless meant to open a breach in the French-Algerian psychological, social, and political identity. In this context, intellectuals engaged in a bitter everlasting argument over causes, consequences, and paths of action. Their debates complicated the polemics in several chain reactions, and brought along confusion and sadness more than anything else. In 1963, Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *La force des choses:* "*Ce n'est pas de gaieté de coeur que j'ai laissé la guerre d'Algérie envahir ma pensée, mon sommeil, mes humeurs*".

Important names such as Albert Camus, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Louis Althusser, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel Foucault were either born in Algeria or took various stands along time as to the war in Algeria. Jacques Derrida only started to speak about his native Algeria during his last twenty years of life, although he lived there until he was 19 years old and also returned for two years during World War Two. Then, the context of the Vichy Regime was characterized, in his words, by the "official antisemitism, the Allied landing at the end of 1942, the terrible colonial repression of Algerian resistance in 1945 at the time of the first serious outbursts heralding the Algerian war" (Derrida and Attridge, 38 – 9).

Derrida uttered a famous statement during a reunion held at the initiative of *CISIA* (*Comité international de soutien aux intellectuels algériens*) and the Organization for Human Rights at the Sorbonne on 7 February 1994. Making an appeal for civil peace, Derrida underlined that only Algerians themselves could offer their own political solutions because, in the present context, everyone acknowledged the complexity of the Algerian issue. He reinforced his support for a peaceful solution:

> *Le recours à la violence armée pour défendre ou conquérir le pouvoir, le terrorisme, la répression, la pratique de la torture et les exécutions, les assassinats et les enlèvements, les destructions, les menaces contre la vie et la sécurité des personnes, ne peuvent que ruiner les possibilités dont dispose encore l'Algérie de construire sa propre démocratie et les conditions de son développement économique*. ("*Parti-Pris pour l'Algérie*", 235)

Therefore, Derrida suggested that the starting point for helping contemporary Algeria was to respect differences and take peaceful measures for the neutralization of the still smoldering conflicts.

In the article "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" printed in *Writing and Difference* (1966), Derrida contends that "orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure which permits the play of its elements inside the total form" (352). Conversely, in Algeria the center had no natural site, it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which the function of the government, as the center of that power, was not located *per se;* its function was distributed throughout the structure of the society like a net; in fact, according to Derrida himself, any center is, paradoxically and simultaneously, within the structure and outside of it. Hence, as long as the center is a variable function and not a location, such a function can be accomplished by several locations; moreover, different centers can accomplish the same function as well. Therefore, a government fulfilling the function of a center is itself a product that replaces the preceding center; the function rests, even if the center is displaced and it has no fixed position.

The structural conditions in Algeria have complicated these terms even more regarding nationhood, power, and belonging. The Cremieux Decrée from 1870 granted Algerian Jews French citizenship, while Algerian Muslims were left with the open option to demand for citizenship if they wished. As a matter of fact, the legislation was a trap, since the Muslims willing to demand French citizenship had to renounce their Islamic rights, which was interpreted as an act of apostasy on their part (Stora, 335). As of 1870, whether one was "Muslim" or "Jew" had a significant impact upon one's relationship with the center of power. Being a Muslim included a variety of origins, such as Kabyle, Chaoui, M'zabite, Mauritanian, Turkish, and Arab, but referring to all these communities as "Muslim" was already a deformation indicating something about the structural possibilities that the center afforded, free to perform games of manipulation. The marker of difference was Islamism, to which all other differences were relegated. On the other hand, the expression *pieds noirs* could be equally applied to the French, Spanish, Italians or Maltese immigrants. Furthermore, French became the official idiom of the land while Arabic was considered a "foreign language". Since the Koranic schools were closed, those people who wanted to pursue an education had to go to the French school where they would delve into French culture. In 1946, forty-six thousand Algerians out of a population of seven and half million had French citizenship (Ottaway, 30).

When Derrida was 12 years old, the French government in Algeria, a country that had not been occupied by Germany, abolished the Cremieux Decrée; consequently, in 1942, they expelled out of high school "a Jew, a little bit black and very Arab who did not understand anything that was going on" (Derrida and Attridge, 58). Apart from being expelled from school,

Derrida lost French citizenship. In this paradoxical situation, he remembered, during the night he was a Jew and not French, since the two became mutually incompatible. As a professor told him, "French culture was not made for little Jews" (326). Algeria substituted one center for another and in 1942 this new center mastered incertitude and neutralized any possibility of a free political play. Nevertheless, the center, the structure repositioned Derrida by default: "thus expelled, I became the external" (289), a condition that was going to mark him all his life.

In *Le Monolinguisme de 1'autre (The Monolingualism of the Other,* 1996), Jacques Derrida analyzes the notion of an Algerian sense of belonging in relationship to one's birth, nationality, citizenship, and language. In this sense, his "*Algériance*" as Hélène Cixous would call it, can be best expressed, in his view, in its paradoxical impossibility. Stylistically a less Derridean book, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* is fragmented and somehow ciphered, made up of short dialogic fragments and autobiographical reflections. Here, unlike in most of the author's writing, the reader can witness the re(con)stitution of a personal testimony in which Derrida inscribes the painful experience of his genealogical rupture. He discusses here the phantasm of the "maternal tongue", the hegemony of a unilateral policy of language, the colonialism in school and culture, the poetics of translations, and also the difficulty of Maghrebian French as the language of both Algerians and French Jews in Algeria.

For Derrida, in the terms of linguistic oppression and colonial expropriation, bilingualism in Algeria is problematic as far as speech and writing are concerned. *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre* starts from the assumption that all culture is by its nature colonial (as opposed to Camus's view, that is, all colonialism is by nature cultural) and instituted by and of language. From this perspective, Derrida considers himself foreign as to his own language, for one always speaks one single language, that is, the "language of the Other" (Derrida, 5). In other words, any speaking subject, irrespective of her/his linguistic heritage, simple or polyglot, is credited with an essential monolingualism. This is for Derrida his personal patrimony:

> *Le monolinguisme dans lequel je respire, même, c'est pour moi l'élément. Non pas un élément naturel, non pas la transparence de l'éther, mais un milieu absolu. Indépassable, incontestable: je ne peux le récuser qu'en attestant son omniprésence en moi. Il m'aura de tout temps précédé. C'est moi. Ce monolinguisme, pour moi, c'est moi* (13).

Derrida contends that his monolingualism dictates to him the "ipseity of everything" and prescribes for him a monastic solitude, as if he were always already doomed before even learning to speak and after he is no longer alive. A stranger to himself like Camus's character, Meursault, the "monolingual" can be summarized in formulaic terms: "*Jamais ce ne sera la mienne. Jamais elle ne le fut en vérité* (13) or "*Qui, je n'ai qu'une langue, or ce n'est pas la mienne*" (14). Thus, criteria such as legitimacy, authority, and domination of French language upon the Arab word are very important since they represent a constellation of factors that corrode the possibility of the Franco-Maghrebine to acquire a stable identity.

The Jews were again offered French citizenship after the fall of the Vichy regime and, afterwards, the war in Algeria lead to a massive emigration of *pieds noirs* to France. All these

things created in Derrida the feeling that he did not have access to collective memory. Lost as many others like him in a sort of "precarious citizenship" (45), he was fascinated by a desire to have a memory and by the hope of a genealogical phantasm. This strange positioning does not signal the apparition of the "Other" in language, but one's own self caught in the moment of maximum actualization. The two moments, purportedly distinct, of not knowing the gap and recognizing the language ("*meconnaissance de l'écart et de reconnaissance de la langue*", 67) have in fact to be superposed over one single cognitive time where it is under the guise of the Other that the Self leaves itself to be known, at the same time clearly One, and never identical with oneself (79).

According to Derrida, multilingual situations, whether personal or cultural, only multiply the same problem over and over again, from one language to another, by not allowing any objectification or exteriorization of the language in which one thinks or speaks. To use a Sartrean vocabulary, the collective Franco-Magrebine project may stand for a universal destiny but the imposition of a unique language makes it impossible for this universal destiny to be appropriated. For Derrida, the interdiction manifests itself in language and writing (51). Although he is forever de-centered and marginal to himself/ herself, the "monolingual" insists that even if the one and only language she speaks is not her own, this does not mean that language were foreign to her either: ("*en disant que la seule langue que je parle n 'est pas la mienne, je n' ai pas dit qu' elle le fut étrangère*", 18).

It is through French, a hospitable language, at the crossing of other idioms and accents, that writing offers to Derrida a heterogeneity of means of expression. Resisting the idea of a national subject as an adequate formula for himself, he offers a non-essentialist cultural critique to any local instantiation of identity. He chooses an idiosyncratic option – he places himself in the space between "identity" and "difference," which enables him to transform language in a vehicle of constant revision and reworking of the two cultural dimensions, French and Algerian.

His own words notwithstanding, Derrida lived his relation with French language in a different way than the postcolonial Algerian writers who write in French but are mostly of Arab origin. In his notes on bilingualism, Abdelkebir Khatibi contends that the Arab writer of French language is trapped in a chiasmus between alienation and non-alienation, as s/he does not write her/ his own language but always already transcribes her/his own name transformed (Khatibi, 189). Muslim authors such as Tahar Ben Jelloun, Assia Djebar or Abdelkebir Khatibi were initially confronted with two options, that is, either totally accept the linguistic European hegemony or totally refuse it by a radical exteriority. Their response was to place themselves in an interstitial space by their refusal to let themselves assimilated neither by the domineering Western nor by the Islamic culture.

In her partly autobiographical book *Le Blanc de l'Algérie (Algerian White,* 1995), Djebar writes "in the white" ("*écriver dans le blanc*", 264), in the language of the Other, in the language of the Same. In other words, she writes in French as a stranger, as a foreigner *(l'étranger),* yet this strange writing is precisely what defamiliarizes the white, just as to historicize the Algerian civil war makes strange the largely Western projection that is North African primitive and continuous unrest. In this sense, the "white of Algeria" is, in the Fanonian spirit of *Black Skin, White Masks,* an imaginative disturbance in the field of the Other.

Algeria becomes for Assia Djebar, as well as for Jacques Derrida, the space of writing, not the space off writing. It is not the void or the blank (the pun on white in French) to be written in by colonial desire once more, but a state of imaginary urgency compelled by an all-too-real emergency – the implosion of a post-colony. In both cases, Djebar and Derrida's, there is the danger of romanticizing the act of writing itself that elides the specificity of the space that is Algeria, as if writing could save it from its complex historical and current impasse.

By the containment of forces of domination, on the one hand, and of fanaticism, on the other Jacques Derrida envisions Algerian society as based on a sense of community where all cultures cohabitate and respect each other. Derrida shows that there any no definitive histories of the subject of the nation state, the "imagined community" that gives to identity its political borders in the world system. Sharing in the largesse of the French language as a primary principle of identification, Derrida nevertheless is not at ease within the confines of its interpellation marked by the intensities of a preexisting linguistic formation.

I have framed Derrida's points in terms of a vacillation on the function of his implication for the Algerian cause. Derrida's imagi-Native engagement leaves an open answer to the question as to whether "Algeria" can be written through a vibrant interrelation of indigenous and colonizer cultural interferences or whether it is to be written on or over by a monolingual logic. The paper has inscribed Derrida's double determinacy in a context of critical reflection that analyzes the ongoing Algerian crisis, one in which elements of national identity and defense circulate today within the complex discourses of transnational cultural exchange.

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Stanford University