

Writing as Sanctuary: sacred space in the work of Hélène Cixous

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The French philosopher Hélène Cixous has shown consistent interest in material places and imagined spaces from her early theoretical work of the 1970s to her more autobiographical writing of recent decades. This article examines the role of place and movement in Cixous's writing and considers how they inhere within her understanding of writing itself. In this article I analyse the spatial metaphors of garden and flight which map onto the larger concerns of place and movement in Cixous's writing. Garden suggests stable locations, while flight indicates the movements in and between places. In tracing the contours of the garden and the trajectories of flight, the article moves from the imagined to the material and back again, while continuing to assert that material places also function within the writer's imagination and that imagined spaces are inflected with traces of materiality.¹ Although gardens are settled, cultivated, grounded, while flight is mobile, unpredictable, airborne, Cixous frequently brings the two metaphors together in unusual conjunctions. The two metaphors of garden and flight form a complex dialectic in Cixous's work. Biblical texts posit the garden as the place of human origin and divine encounter, while its loss has been seen as the original exile.² While Cixous draws upon these Biblical tropes in her writing, she deconstructs traditional understandings of origin and exile. A child of immigrants who has lived most of her adult life away from her birthplace (Algeria), she complicates understandings of home. Places of past and present dwelling and the flights towards and away from them form a significant element of her creative projects.

The third term of sanctuary enables my exploration of the relationship between garden and flight. The metaphor of sanctuary in Cixous's texts encourages a theological reading of her work. A sanctuary is defined as a holy space and a place of refuge. It forms the connection between garden and flight as it is the endpoint of flight (both a goal and a waystation) and gardens themselves are sanctuaries. However, this identification is ambiguous; for Cixous,

gardens are places of sacred encounter, but they are not always safe refuges. In considering the relationship between origins, flight and creativity, she configures writing itself as a sanctuary, thus bringing together imaginative concerns and material contexts. The dwelling place of the stranger, mystery, and all that escapes, writing becomes the sanctuary that is a place of healing, but one that is open to the movements of flight and encounter.

Cixous is a prolific writer who composes in many genres (critical theory, autobiography, fiction and drama) and blurs their boundaries. Jacques Derrida referred to her as ‘a poet-thinker, very much a poet and a very thinking poet’ and this is an apt description of her style.⁴ The Cixous scholar may find herself frequently falling back on expansive terms such as ‘text’ and ‘writing’ in order to encapsulate the shifting stylistics and generic allegiances of Cixous’s work. While acknowledging that a division of Cixous’s texts into generic categories is problematic, I have chosen to concentrate on her theoretical and autobiographical essays. I wish to consider here how the two genres come together and illuminate each other. Her autobiographical writing relies on a consideration of language, writing and creativity which is theoretically sophisticated while her theoretical writing is grounded in material considerations which are primarily drawn from autobiography. Her practice of writing in a style that eludes easy categorisation but invites the reader’s engagement is a challenge this article attempts to take up in its analysis of her unusual texts.

For the sake of brevity and clarity this article draws primarily from three works: ‘Coming to Writing’ (1991), *Vivre l’orange / To live the Orange* (1979) and *Stigmata: escaping texts* (1998). My discussion in this article is largely confined to the analysis of discrete passage for the sake of the reader who may not be familiar with these texts and to allow space for the close reading that her dense and image heavy writing demands. My analysis depends on close observation of the images and words used in particular passages as I trace the metaphors of garden, flight and sanctuary across these texts. The essays in these volumes all combine autobiography and theory in varying degrees. They focus on issues which are prevalent across Cixous’s oeuvre while also highlighting

concerns that I find particularly compelling, i.e. the intersection of materiality, creativity and the sacred.

‘Coming to Writing’ was originally published in French in 1977, portions of it were published in English in *The Literary Review* in 1987 with a full translation included as the title essay in a 1991 collection by Harvard University Press. The essay recapitulates many of the themes contained in the more famous manifesto ‘Laugh of the Medusa’: a critique of the phallogentrism that bars women from discourse, an exploration and celebration of feminine writing and a call to writers to participate in utopian imagination. ‘Coming to Writing’ is a much longer piece than ‘Medusa’ and contains lengthy autobiographical sections in which Cixous meditates on her own experience of literature, language and writing as well as psychoanalytic musings on the impact of the death of her father on her writing. I am particularly interested in the role of place in these meditations and the language of the sacred that Cixous employs in her discussion of writing and creativity.

Vivre l'orange / To live the Orange was written in the same period and bears a number of stylistic similarities to essays such as ‘Coming to Writing’ and ‘Laugh of the Medusa’ but it has a different focus. A bilingual edition with French and English on opposing pages was published by the feminist publishing house des femmes in 1979. The text stages an encounter between poetics and politics in which Cixous grapples with the questions of how to engage in both writing and activism. She concludes that writing is an essential part of living in community with others; she claims it as an act of witness and of love. *To live the Orange* is the most abstract and poetic of Cixous’s texts under consideration here. However, read alongside the more autobiographical ‘Coming to Writing’ and ‘My Algeriance’, it becomes evident that the abstract gardens in *To live the Orange* correlate to the gardens of Cixous’s childhood.

The connection between gardens and writing (both are sources of creativity and places of encounter) is evident in all the essays under consideration. The two essays from *Stigmata* ‘Writing Blind’ and ‘My Algeriance’ are both concerned with writing and the origins of creativity.

'My Algeriance' shows Cixous at her most autobiographical as she considers her childhood in Algeria and the process of departure that brought her to France but gave her a sense of belonging only to movement: having departed but never arriving. The significance of place and departure and the correlated movement within language fuels Cixous's writing. In 'Writing Blind' Cixous takes on sacred language, invoking apocalypse, genesis, grace, God and the fall in the service of a meditation on writing and its excess and mystery. Thus 'Writing Blind' allows me to return to the more abstract meditations on creativity in 'Coming to Writing' and *To live the Orange* and locate the connection between place and movement, garden and flight within a sanctuary of and for writing.

Rather than take Cixous's texts one by one, the article is structured thematically. I begin with a brief outline of the concern with place and movement evident in the material turn in cultural criticism and theology. I then move to a discussion of gardens in Cixous's work as illustrative of her concern with place, followed by an analysis of flight as illustrative of her concern with movement. Finally, I turn to sanctuary as a third term that brings to two metaphors together and enables an exploration of the nexus of creativity, materiality and divinity. This is a complex model but I hope the reader will bear with me as such complexity allows the subtlety and creativity of Cixous's work to emerge. Moreover, in engaging with Cixous's theoretical and autobiographical work and mapping the images she uses, this model allows the article itself to participate in the concern with place and movement. Cixous's writing on place, movement and identity resonates both personally and professionally for me as I have moved between countries (the United States, New Zealand and the United Kingdom) and academic disciplines (English literature and theology). In reading Cixous theologically this article aims to be something of a sanctuary-that-moves; a space to encourage creative reading, it makes a pilgrimage of its own.

The material turn: place and movement in cultural criticism and theology

Recent decades have seen a turn to materiality as a key concern in many disciplines as well as the rise of interdisciplinary fields, such as human geography and postcolonial studies, interested in the convergence of geography and culture. Human geographers argue that ‘place is best understood as a locus of meaning’ and is thus a human construct as much as a natural one, while literary critics have shown increasing interest in the material contexts and locations of literary production.⁶ In attending to particular places, the issues of movement and exchange are always already implicated. Modernist literature repeatedly invokes the porous boundaries between public and private places, the many types of places, geographical conflict, and the movement of subjects through space.⁸

Discussions of place soon become complicated by the intrusion of movement. Postcolonial studies foregrounds movement by attending to issues of contested territory, displacement and diaspora. James Clifford shifts the anthropological opposition between ‘cosmopolitan (travellers)’ and ‘local (natives)’ and argues for a comparative approach that examines ‘travelling-in-dwelling’ and ‘dwelling-in-travelling.’⁹ By shifting the mode of interpretation ‘[p]ractices of displacement might emerge as *constitutive* of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension’.¹⁰ However, some scholars are wary of dismissing the space of ‘home’ too quickly.¹¹ Postcolonial theologians have emphasised roots *and* routes, arguing that the two terms complicate and illuminate each other, and suggesting their relevance for new theological endeavours.¹² In Wonhee Anne Joh’s formulation, ‘home’ becomes a place that is also a factor of movement, an interior space that participates in the sacred journey that is open to both past and future. As part of a sacred journey, ‘home’ may be figured as a sanctuary-that-moves, an imagined space that yields healing and shelters new, creative gestures in its interaction with ‘elsewhere’. Attention to routes can provide a corrective to nostalgic desires for return to a pure origin that may flatten difference.¹³ Joh is not advocating a teleological

wandering oriented towards a return to origins, but a revisioning of the life-giving possibilities for living 'in between'.

In addition to postcolonial theology's interest in emplacement and movement, the material turn is also evident in theology's growing interest in sacred space. Louis Jacobs posits two definitions of sacred space: one is to see the divine as 'especially manifested' in a particular place, the other is to 'see the holy place as hallowed by experience and association'.¹⁵ Some scholars interested in sacred space have turned their attention to the theological, social and aesthetic significance of European churches and cathedrals while others have meditated on the sacredness of the (wild) landscape and its cultural representation.¹⁶

Consideration of sacred space often turns to pilgrimage, a practice of traversing geographical places that allows an exploration of both place and movement in religious terms. As a historical practice and a theological metaphor, pilgrimage demonstrates the folding together of material culture and abstract discourse. Christian theologians frequently turn to pilgrimage as a means of expressing the importance of the material world held in tension with a continual displacement of identity for those whose lives are aimed towards an eschatological beyond, a kingdom not of this earth.¹⁷ Thus the pilgrim is both at home and not at home on the earth. The pilgrim moves, yet the pilgrimage is consummated by reaching a particular place (a shrine or other sacred place). Moreover, pilgrimage may be deployed as a spiritual metaphor in numerous ways. Even mystics whose movements may be severely circumscribed utilise themes of journeys in their writing.¹⁸ Pilgrimages may be interior events.

Michel de Certeau's writing on pilgrimage provides a useful model for imagining a sanctuary that encompasses both place and movement. De Certeau argues that in the modern period, the pilgrim undergoes 'perpetual departure' in a pilgrimage whose goal has been effaced.¹⁹ For de Certeau, the pathways of this pilgrimage may be traced in writing; however, in Cixous's work we see not merely the trace of a perpetual departure but the sacred places themselves displaced into writing. De Certeau's theorising on modern pilgrimage and the movement of the

sacred from divine revelation to language provides a useful bridge between Jacobs's definitions of sacred space and Cixous's work. In Cixous we see the sacred in writing; this can be understood as experience and association hallowing certain places (material or imagined). Her work also gestures towards uncontainable mystery in her view of writing as a message from elsewhere which correlates to an understanding of the divine as especially manifest in particular places. In Cixous, Jacobs's definitions are stretched and made strange and inextricably associated with language and de Certeau helps me follow the thread that binds literary abstractions to material concerns.

Fragrant dust: gardens in Oran

'In Oran, I had a very strong feeling of paradise, even while it was the war and my family was hit from all sides: by the concentration camps in the North, by Vichy in Algeria'.²⁶ These two images, paradise and unjust exclusion or destruction, are at the heart of Cixous's writing. The garden is an important trope in Cixous's work, allowing diverse explorations into Algeria, family, knowledge, sensuality, and creativity. In speaking of her childhood in Algeria, Cixous invokes the garden, the Biblical image for paradise, yet this does not encode nostalgia for an imagined, lost, perfect childhood. Her writing explores the complications, difficulties and losses of growing up Jewish in a French colony during the 1940s: 'North Africa was an arid and perfumed theatre, salt, jasmine, orange blossoms, where violent plays were staged. The scene was always war'.²⁷ Cixous does not consider the garden to be a site of pre-lapsarian perfection and innocence; rather, the garden is the scene for expulsion that occurs through the anti-Semitic politics of the Vichy government. Cixous describes her experiences in the 'Cercle Militaire' garden in Oran as an initiation to the dynamics of exclusion:

My father was a military officer during the war (temporarily, because he was a doctor), so suddenly we were admitted to the only garden in Oran (Oran is a very desert city), that of the Officers' Club. But the place was a hotbed of anti-Semitism. I was three years old, I hadn't the slightest idea that I was Jewish. The other children started attacking me, and I didn't even know what it was to be Jewish, Catholic and so on.²⁸

This garden is already marked by class and colonialism; it is because he is an officer in the French military that Georges Cixous and his family are admitted there in the first place. However, Cixous also claims that the political markers of nationalism, colonialism and anti-Semitism are insufficient to contain the burgeoning growth of the garden. She opposes the regimen of the formal garden with a wildly exuberant creativity: 'I skirted the walls of their French parks with my abundance, my drunken lands, my wild orchards'.²⁹ This orchard suggests the paradox of the garden, a space that is both wild and cultivated, the interstice of nature and culture.

In much of Cixous's writing, the garden is emphasised as the place of encounter. We have seen how this encounter may be negative, but in many instances it is intimate and generative. 'In Writing Blind' the garden is invoked as the place of new beginnings which hold within them previous beginnings and allow for intimacy between generations: 'the walks in the garden with my daughter and my mother remain unforgettable. Ten-years-ago grows back today. My mother my daughter and I, in the garden we engender ourselves reciprocally'. Here Cixous suggests that the child creates the mother as much as the reverse, while the repeated beginnings indicate that this mutual formation is not a one-time occurrence but a continuous process.

In *To live the Orange*, Cixous presents us with an abstract, imagined garden, one that is located both within the heart and between persons:

when we have not yet lost the gardens of Encounters [...] we conjure them up, stone after stone, each mountain, each orange, each stone of plant each fruit of sky each, and brooding before the heap of stars, planted before the flower of each face, we open ourselves up to things, we anticipate them, with words gathered on the carpet of the garden, [...]

and in their way of entering the garden by way of the breast, and of bearing themselves very gentle, very strong to encounter the heart, without detour, and of being there at the bottom of the garden in front of the heart, we sense that they are women, that we love [...].

To learn everything by the light of things [...] letting roses grow in the garden of one's heart [...] being garden and vigil, ground and roots, and thus waiting for everything, being the anticipation of each thing, the repose of the stone, the restiveness of the crocus on the eve of the first of march [...] we hear others living, everything calls and vibrates [...] telling us their names, giving us their names to say, to not forget. [...] But too often we forget.³⁰

Cixous argues that attending to the memory of atrocities is a necessary task for the writer. Yet her writing is far from bleak – she holds the responsibility of remembering alongside her delight in the presence of others. The sweetness of fruit and the fragrance of flowers suggest an openness to the other that is not innocent. In this long description of the ‘garden of Encounters’ Cixous uses concrete images – stones, flowers, sky, crocuses on the eve of the first of March – in a surrealist style. Stars are piled up like fruit stones, flowers are placed in the sky like stars and this strange vigil by tree roots becomes a metaphor for encounters with other women. These images mark the intimacies of human communion experienced within the body, felt, touched and tasted. Moreover, the flowers, stones and oranges are also names, thus language and the sensual materiality of human encounter are brought together. Forgetting others is figured as a failure of imagination; persons and the flowers and fruits of the garden go together. To forget entails a loss of creativity.

The aridity of the Algerian landscape is not something Cixous welcomes. She uses it as a metaphor for writer’s block – ‘dry silence’ – while the return of creativity is marked as succulent fruit: ‘She [Clarice Lispector, as encountered through her writing] put the orange back into the deserted hands of my writing, and with her orange-colored accents she rubbed the eyes of my writing which were arid and covered with white films’.³¹ However, the dry soil itself, the dust, functions alongside the fruits and flowers of the garden as a source of pleasure and delight. In an interview, Cixous reverses the expected evaluation of dust, claiming, ‘I believe that the stone is a diamond [...]. What interests me is precisely to enable the celebration of the grain of dust’.³²

The idea of ‘native earth’ is undermined in Cixous’s writing. She loves the dust of Oran, not because she belongs there, but because she does not, because she is foreign. It is not her own and she loves it not as a birthright, but as a passion:

In the smiling and happy little girl I was, I hid [...] a secret, restless, clandestine little girl, who knew well that in truth she had been born elsewhere. [...] [T]he physical feeling of being a frail mushroom, a spore hatched over night, who only holds to the earth with hasty and frail roots. Another feeling in the shadows: the

unshakeable certainty that ‘the Arabs’ were the true offspring of this dusty and perfumed soil. But when I walked barefoot with my brother on the hot trails of Oran, I felt the sole of my body caressed by the welcoming palms of the country’s ancient dead, and the torment of my soul was assuaged.³³

Here the dust itself participates in paradise, holding perfume as would flowers. In ‘My Algeriance’ dust is an image that holds together life and death, foreignness and belonging. It is death, rather than birth that ties her to the land:

I left my father there to mix his dust with that dust, a tribute paid to a borrowed land.

To leave behind the grave of one’s father: through dust I acquire a sort of invisible belonging to a land to which I am bound by my atoms without nationality. Because of the phantom of my father I cannot be patriated anywhere.³⁴

Not only does her father’s death confer belonging – albeit a precarious, ‘sort of invisible belonging’ – but it precludes subsequent possibilities for belonging anywhere else. Her father’s dust mixes with Algeria’s ‘ancient dead’ and therefore participates in the welcoming gesture towards the barefoot little girl from elsewhere who will always both belong and not belong to Oran.

Cixous’s Algeriance

I now move from a discussion of place and the garden to an exploration of flight as Cixous’s metaphor for movement. As we have seen in her writing on the gardens of Oran, Cixous’s understanding of her own emplacement is always complicated by a sense of her foreignness. This informs her approach to identity, language, and writing more broadly. Language is intimately related to nationality and forms a complex constellation in her texts. Her attitude towards French nationality is different from her attitude to the French language: one she resists, the other she courts. For Cixous, being within French (the language), but not-French (the nationality) is a compelling play of identity markers that provides a passport to literature.

Cixous follows Virginia Woolf’s outsider when she declares: ‘From 1955 on, I adopted an imaginary nationality which is literary nationality’.³⁵ Cixous’s claim to literary nationality does not indicate a refusal to engage with the politics of national identity (her criticism of French

colonialism in North Africa is evidence of this engagement) but a choice to attend to the implications for personal belonging within literature and the traces of nationality, ethnicity and other differences that are evident within the literary realm. This may be seen in her literary criticism, where her work crosses numerous national lines (she writes on literature from Ireland, France, Germany, Russia and Brazil).³⁶

Cixous's analysis of her own family's journeys and identity indicates the complexity and confusion generated by national boundaries:

To be French, and not a single French person on the genealogical tree admittedly it is a fine miracle [...].
The paradox of this passport: having it always closed me in a double-bind.
On one hand 'I am French' is a lie or a legal fiction.
On the other to say 'I am not French' is a breach of courtesy. And of the gratitude due for hospitality. The stormy, intermittent hospitality of the State and the Nation. But the infinite hospitality of the language.³⁷

Her sense of 'luck' is such that she recognises the value of the ability to move across boundaries granted by the possession of a French passport: 'I rejoiced in French passporosity'.³⁸ It was the possession of a French passport (due to the shifting French-German border before and after the First World War) that enabled her grandmother and mother to emigrate to Algeria before the Second World War.³⁹ While Cixous acknowledges the privileges that come with her French passport, situating herself as a guest of both nation and language, she emphasises that the delights of being French stem from France's position as a coastal nation constantly traversed by foreigners. Its boundaries are porous.

For Cixous, writing is always caught up with movement: 'Journeys, traversals, are the very stuff of all her writing'.⁴⁰ She is concerned with the speed of writing, detailing her efforts as a writer to catch a glimpse of language as it rushes past, but without holding it fast. Writing is a message from elsewhere as well as a movement in itself: 'A poem merely passes, coming from elsewhere then moving on. Signifying to us, in passing, at its passage, this elsewhere', 'writing is first of all a departure, an embarkation, an expedition'.⁴¹ However, Cixous also suggests that movement and place are co-implicated. The mysterious elsewhere of writing's origin is a place

that is not specific, but that indicates continual *displacement*. ‘Elsewhere’ is a term that resonates across Cixous’s texts, as we have seen in her writing on the dust of Oran. It is an/other space that serves to destabilise her belonging in Algeria, mirroring her own sense of herself as other:

My way of thinking was born with the thought that I could have been born elsewhere, in one of the twenty countries where a living fragment of my maternal family had landed after it blew up on the Nazi minefield. [...] The strange molecule detached from the black skies of the north had landed in Africa.⁴²

The sense of the precariousness of history’s interaction with geography marks much of Cixous’s work. Her family is described as merely a fragment, haunted by those who were lost in the concentration camps, whose roots will always be fragile. However, Cixous’s relationship with (the memory of) places (Oran and Algiers), and movement from them, is clearly generative. Even in enigmatic texts like *To live the Orange*, Oran is present not only in the locution ‘Oran-je’ (orange/Oran-I), but also in the play of aridity and sweetness within the text.⁴³ Cixous’s departure from Algeria is both literal and metaphorical, a departure that marks the impossibility of her belonging to Algeria:

When I was three [...] I knew that I was destined to leave. [...] That destination, destinality, decision, was so strong that I have been able to say: when I was three I left. It was pure departure. [...] I was in deferment and flight. [...] My own maternal family, the German one, had already detached itself from its earth (Strasbourg, Budapest, Osnabrück, Bratislava, etc.). The possibility of living without taking root was familiar to me. I never call that exile. Some people react to expulsion with the need to belong. For me, as for my mother, the world sufficed. [...] (In the family mode of dwelling there remained a nomad’s simplicity: never any furniture. Always the backpack).⁴⁴

Cixous lists the Eastern and Central European cities of her maternal family but never describes her return to Europe as a homecoming, rather, it is ‘deferment and flight’. However, she also refuses to consider the loss of Algeria as an action that places her in exile because Algeria always already belonged to others. Thus she claims a rootless belonging, a nomadic mode of living: ‘always the backpack’. We may wonder if Cixous is being disingenuous here. It is important to acknowledge Cixous’s economic, educational and racial privilege and the related freedom of movement she enjoys. Many intellectuals have a somewhat nomadic existence but this is hardly

to be compared to forced exile (to be fair, Cixous does not make that comparison) and one expects the lack of furniture to be hyperbole. Cixous does not give us the material details of her own move (or her mother's and brother's) from Algiers to Paris, dwelling on her psychological departure rather than the physical. Here, as elsewhere in Cixous's oeuvre, the reader may be uncomfortable at the metaphors chosen and her celebratory style. However, Cixous acknowledges the danger of her writing strategy. She prefers to risk offense rather than claim a false innocence.⁴⁵ She argues that it is better to speak to the place of loss or horror than to be silent.⁴⁶ She does explicitly state here that she does not consider herself an exile nor does she over-identify with those who suffer, continuing to emphasize the space between persons and the unique experience of others as well as the intimacy of encounter.

It is movement, departure, always-already departing that Cixous identifies with the process of writing:

I went towards France, without having had the idea of arriving there. Once in France I was not there. I saw that I would never arrive in France. [...] [T]he chance of my genealogy and history arranged things in such a way that I would *stay passing*, in an originary way for me I am always passing by, in *passance*. I like the progressive form and the words that end in *-ance*. [...] To depart (so as) not to arrive from Algeria is also, incalculably, a way of not having broken with Algeria. [...] I want *arrivance*, movement, unfinished in my life.⁴⁷

She coins the term 'Algeriance' to signify this perpetual departure, the process of leaving that carries Algeria with her.⁴⁸ She undermines any stable definition of origin or emplacement; immigration is impossible and origin itself is located in movement. These movements are correlated with language and the formalities of grammar in Cixous's texts, 'the progressive form', but she also correlates them with the activity of writing itself: 'To fly/steal is woman's gesture, to steal into language to make it fly'.⁴⁹

Writing as the sanctuary-that-moves

As we have seen, place and movement in Cixous's texts form an intimate dialectic; each complicates and provokes the other, but they are thus brought into close proximity. Flight forms a crucial aspect of her spatial poetics, while gardens are portrayed as the source and provocation

for flights that carry within them the fragrance of dust and fruit. The meeting point of place and movement, garden and flight, can be seen in Cixous's deployment of the metaphor of sanctuary. If gardens are sanctuaries in as much as they are locations of divine encounter, sanctuary is also the final point of flight, its goal. However, she destabilises notions of origin and goal and this deconstructive practice is evident in her deployment of sanctuary as a third term that brings together place and movement.

In locating sanctuary in a language that escapes mastery, insisting on its foreignness to the speaker or auditor, Cixous's texts suggest that sanctuaries are as much a matter of routes as roots. The sanctuary-that-moves finds expression in the Jewish tabernacle, the repository of the Torah that travels with the people. In considering the relationship between settled location and movement with Judaism, Alana Vincent emphasises that the Torah was given to a wandering people, and that when King David suggested building the temple, the prophet Nathan had a vision in which 'the resistance of God to a fixed dwelling-place' is made clear.⁵⁰ Moreover, '*mishkan* [the Hebrew word for Tabernacle] shares the same root as *shekhinah*, the presence-of-God-dwelling-amongst-Israel'.⁵¹ This suggests that because the tabernacle is the shelter for the Torah and related to an understanding of God as dwelling-with, so God can be understood to reside within the language of Torah.

Cixous presents a slippery construction of the relationship between sanctuary and language, a mobius strip that turns into its own obverse side:

But god, I say, is the phantom of writing, it is her pretext and her promise. God is the name of all that has not yet been said. Without the word *Dieu* to shelter the infinite multiplicity of all that could be said the world would be reduced to its shell and I to my skin.⁵²

The idea of sanctuary as located in language is reversed here; the divine is a refuge for writing, for a language that is open to the future. However, God is also the other of writing, 'her pretext and her promise', the alterity within words and metaphors, 'what has not yet been said'. In this formulation, writing becomes God's shelter and dwelling place.

In the critical analysis of Cixous's call to 'write the body', there has been little attention given to Cixous's construction of the body itself as a sacred text⁵³. In 'Coming to Writing' she describes her body itself as a book:

I am already text. History, love, violence, time, work, desire inscribe it in my body. [...] Vision: my breast as the Tabernacle. Open. My lungs like the scrolls of the Torah. But a Torah without end whose scrolls are imprinted and unfurled throughout time.⁵⁴

The tabernacle is open, therefore, the reader is put in the position of the high priest entering the holy of holies. This 'Torah without end' resembles the 'hidden Torah' of Jewish mysticism that existed before the creation of the world and is identified with divine wisdom.⁵⁵ Cixous's declaration that her breast is an open tabernacle and her lungs, Torah, indicates that the divine dwells within bodily movement and is as close as breath. The word for breath and spirit is the same in Hebrew: *ruach*. In the beginning of Genesis, it is the *ruach* of God that hovers over the face of the deep and the *ruach* that God breathes into the clay to give it life.⁵⁶ Thus we can draw a connection between Cixous's breath as a marker for the embodied creativity of the woman writer and the divine spirit that speaks and breathes creation into being. Writing, materiality and divine creativity co-inhere. Moreover, the breath of God hovering and the breath of God inspiring life suggest that creativity is not static but always involves movement.

Language becomes a sanctuary for Cixous and particular words become a refuge that shelters creative activity and imagination. These refuges are not closed spaces, but are open to the movements of writing towards the future. In Cixous's work, difference in language becomes the means of mapping the complexity of her family's movements across Europe and North Africa. Literary exiles often figure their relationship to language in fraught terms – alienation from the 'mother tongue', or from their adopted languages, or both.⁵⁷ However, Cixous understands her relationship to language differently; she repeatedly returns to the numerous languages of her childhood as indicative of a lack of a singular mother tongue. This becomes a

trope for her belief that she does not belong to or 'have' a point of origin. But Cixous constructs this lack as plenitude – her lack of a singular origin yields a multiplicity of points of contact:

We played at languages in our house, my parents passed with pleasure and deftness from one language to the other, [...] one from French the other from German, jumping through Spanish and English, one with a bit of Arabic and the other with a bit of Hebrew. When I was ten years old my father gave me at the same time an Arabic teacher and a Hebrew teacher.⁵⁸

In 'Coming to Writing', Cixous locates the source of her writing practice in this experience of hearing multiple languages within an intimate environment.

Blessing: my writing stems from two languages, at least. In my tongue the "foreign" languages are my sources, my agitations. "Foreign": the music in me from elsewhere; precious warning: don't forget that all is not here [...]. Languages pass into my tongue, understand one another, call to one another, touch and alter one another, tenderly, timidly, sensually; blend their personal pronouns together, in the effervescence of differences.⁵⁹

Here writing is the nexus between linguistic and geographic differences and movements. Space and language come together in writing. The 'elsewhere' that continues to re-appear in Cixous's writing is the site of creative sound that cannot be contained. Languages are personified and the sensuality of the writer's experience of speaking and hearing languages is projected onto the languages themselves, who grow and change in their interactions across difference.

Conclusion: nomadic pilgrimage

The idea of a sanctuary that moves suggests not only the Jewish tabernacle, but also the sacred excursion of pilgrimage. In considering the relevance of mysticism for the modern age, Michel de Certeau develops the idea of pilgrimage without a goal:

[I]t seems that what for the most part still remains, in contemporary culture, is the movement of perpetual departure. [...] the traveller no longer has foundation nor goal. Given over to a nameless desire, he [sic] is the drunken boat. Henceforth this desire can no longer speak to someone. [...] It goes on walking, then, tracing itself out in silence, in writing.⁶⁰

This nomadic pilgrimage of perpetual departure echoes Cixous's continual departure and non-arrival. As we have seen with the gardens of *To live the Orange*, 'Coming to Writing' and 'My Algeriance', the traveller's foundation may be one she constructs in writing. In naming her

desires, she suggests that nomadic pilgrimage may not so much lack a goal, as resituate it, locating it in the hands that write and the ground beneath the pilgrim's feet. Expatriates like Cixous do not aimlessly wander, but rather, in their commitment to being elsewhere, compose purposeful creative trajectories.

De Certeau argues that in modernity the sacred is displaced from divine revelation to language.⁶¹ Cixous's formulation of God as the 'pretext' and 'promise' for writing, paired with her claim that the woman writer is a thief, a bird, a fly-by-night,⁶² indicates a sacred space that is by definition creative and open, and that moves with the trajectories of a writing that can never be captured or contained. Thus divinity itself is a *place*, a refuge for writing, for language open to the future. Writing becomes both God's dwelling place and an activity shaped within divine space.

As we have seen, Cixous's work employs both theoretical and autobiographical modes (among others). In bringing the two together, she provides a compelling model for theological reflection that is grounded in the material but also encourages flights of imagination. Imagination plays a central role in her writing, as she uses metaphors playfully to enable the writer (and reader) to traverse genres and open up new avenues for creative thinking. The tropes of sanctuary and pilgrimage, deployed within intimate meditations on emplacement and displacement, indicate a creative practice that offers a way of being in the world that seeks divine encounter in myriad forms and gestures.

¹ Scholars define space and place in different ways. Andrew Thacker argues that, generally, for geographical theorists, space 'indicates a sense of movement, [...] of becoming, while *place* [...] impl[ies] a static sense of location, of being'; Andrew Thacker, *Moving through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) p. 13. Avril Maddrell offers a contrasting definition that focuses on meaning: 'while "space" refers to an area or physical container, space becomes place through interaction and signification'; Avril Maddrell, 'Memory, Mourning and Landscape in the Scottish Mountains: Discourses of Wilderness, Gender and Entitlement in Online and Media Debates on Mountainside Memorials', *Memory, Mourning and Landscape*, eds. Elizabeth Anderson, Avril Maddrell, Kate McLoughlin and Alana Vincent (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010) p. 124. My association of place with material locations and space with imagination and language is related to both of these definitions. I employ the terms loosely, as organising concepts rather than technical terminology.

- ² Genesis 3:8; John 19:41-20:18.
- ⁴ Qtd. in Ian Blyth and Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Live Theory* (New York and London: Continuum, 2004) p. 67.
- ⁶ Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987) p. 28.
- ⁸ Thacker, pp. 6-7.
- ⁹ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997) p. 36.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. p. 3.
- ¹¹ For further discussion of the importance of home, see Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1998) pp. 1-7, 37-46; bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009) pp. 1-24.
- ¹² Wonhee Anne Joh, *Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) p. 9.
- ¹³ Pui-lan Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2005) p. 39.
- ¹⁵ Louis Jacobs, *Judaism and Theology: Essays on the Jewish Religion* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2005) p. 51.
- ¹⁶ David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) pp. 245-349; Bernard McGinn, 'From Admirable Tabernacle to House of God: Some Theological Reflections on Medieval Architectural Integration', *Artistic Integration in Gothic Buildings*, eds. Kathryn Brush, Peter Draper and Virginia Chieffo Raguin (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995). David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art, and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004); Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001).
- ¹⁷ Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity* (London: SCM Press, 2001) p. 116.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. p. 142.
- ¹⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: Volume One, the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992) p. 299.
- ²⁶ Hélène Cixous and Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) p. 196.
- ²⁷ Hélène Cixous, *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) p. 208.
- ²⁸ Cixous qtd. in Susan Rabin Suleiman, 'Writing Past the Wall: Or the Passion According to H.C.' *Coming to Writing' and Other Essays*, ed. Deborah Jenson (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1991) pp. xviii-xix.
- ²⁹ Hélène Cixous, *Coming to Writing' and Other Essays*, trans. Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson, Ann Liddle and Susan Sellers, ed. Deborah Jenson (London: Harvard University Press, 1991) p. 46.
- ³⁰ Hélène Cixous, *Vivre L'orange / to Live the Orange*, trans. Sarah Cornell and Ann Liddle (Paris: Des Femmes, 1979) pp. 70-74.
- ³¹ Ibid. pp. 12, 14.
- ³² Hélène Cixous, *White Ink: Interviews on Sex, Text and Politics*, ed. Susan Sellers (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008) p. 19.
- ³³ Cixous, *Stigmata* p. 205.
- ³⁴ Ibid. p. 206.
- ³⁵ Cixous and Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints* p. 204. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1966) p. 109.
- ³⁶ Further examples can be seen in fiction, for example, *Manna: for the Mandelstams for the Mandelas* ventures from the Soviet Union to South Africa in its exploration of the terrains of an exile that is not an ecstatic flight but one that is fraught with pain and loss.
- ³⁷ Cixous, *Stigmata* pp. 206-07.
- ³⁸ Ibid. p. 207.
- ³⁹ Much of Cixous's extended family remained in Europe and many of her relatives perished in the Holocaust; Cixous and Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints* pp. 188-94.
- ⁴⁰ Verena Andermatt Conley, *Hélène Cixous* (Toronto and Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 1992) p. 58.
- ⁴¹ Hélène Cixous, *Firstdays of the Year*, trans. Catherine A. F. MacGillivray (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) p. 6; Cixous, *Stigmata* pp. 184-85.
- ⁴² Cixous, *Stigmata* p. 204.
- ⁴³ Cixous, *To Live the Orange* pp. 30-32.
- ⁴⁴ Cixous, *Stigmata* pp. 223-224.
- ⁴⁵ Heather Walton, *Imagining Theology: Women, Writing and God* (London: T & T Clark, 2007) pp. 61-2.
- ⁴⁶ Cixous, *White Ink: Interviews on Sex, Text and Politics* p. 90.

⁴⁷ Cixous, *Stigmata* pp. 226-27.

⁴⁸ Ibid. pp. 204, 230.

⁴⁹ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1996) p. 96.

⁵⁰ Alana M. Vincent, 'Seder and Imagined Landscapes', *Memory, Mourning and Landscape*, eds. Elizabeth Anderson, Avril Maddrell, Kate McLoughlin and Alana M. Vincent (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010) p. 150. See 2 Samuel 7:5-7.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Cixous, *Stigmata* p. 200.

⁵³ For example, see Blyth and Sellers, pp. 30-34; Abigail Bray, *Hélène Cixous: Writing and Sexual Difference* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) pp. 28-37; Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of L'écriture Féminine', *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Diane Price Herndl and Robyn R. Warhol (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997) pp. 373-77; Morag Shiach, *Helene Cixous: A Politics of Writing* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991) pp. 17-21. It is worth noting that Blyth and Sellers do make brief references to Cixous's Jewishness and note her interest in the Talmud as a model for reading, writing and interpretation, however, they do not mention her bodily metaphors in this context: 75-6. Additionally, scholars who consider the religious implications of Cixous's work tend to focus on her commitment to the other, the circulation of desire and the significance of these for subjectivity without explicit reference to the conjunction of bodily and sacred metaphors that I am exploring here, see: Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) pp. 85-88; Amy Hollywood, 'Mysticism, Death and Desire in the Work of Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément', *Religion and French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives*, eds. Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady and Judith L. Poxon (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) pp. 145-52; Sal Renshaw, *The Subject of Love: Hélène Cixous and the Feminine Divine* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2009) pp. 133-190.

⁵⁴ Cixous, *Coming to Writing* p. 52.

⁵⁵ Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982) pp. 37-38; Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990) p. 34.

⁵⁶ I am grateful to Alana Vincent for reminding me of the connection between breath and spirit in the opening chapters of Genesis.

⁵⁷ Norman Manea, 'Nomadic Language', *The Writer Uprooted: Contemporary Jewish Exile Literature*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008) pp. 1-26; Maeera Y. Shreiber, 'The End of Exile: Jewish Identity and Its Diasporic Poetics', *PMLA* 113.2 (1998): pp. 277-84.

⁵⁸ Cixous, *Stigmata* p. 225.

⁵⁹ Cixous, *Coming to Writing* p. 21.

⁶⁰ de Certeau, p. 299.

⁶¹ Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986) p. 81.

⁶² Cixous, *Stigmata* p. 200; Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Diane Price Herndl and Robyn R. Warhol (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1997) pp. 356-57.