

gument that Naipaul lets the West almost completely off the hook in critiquing former colonies (37) ignores his frequent condemnations of colonialism. Scholars looking for a more balanced approach to Naipaul can either read Weiss and Nixon together, or, preferably, look up Cudjoe's *Materialist Reading*. Of all the recent studies, Cudjoe's offers the best combination of original readings informed by respect for Naipaul's achievement and a historicized accounting for his limitations.

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Morag Shiach. *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991. pp. 161. \$49.95; \$13.95 pb.

A quick glance at the bibliography to Morag Shiach's *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing* reveals the disparity in both number and genre of Cixous's French texts versus those that have been translated into English. By far the majority of her texts in English translation are the critical and theoretical articles; most of her fiction and drama has yet to be translated into or performed in English. As a result, there are, in effect, two dominant constructions of Hélène Cixous: the French Cixous is an experimental feminist writer and poststructuralist critic and theorist; as interpreted primarily by British and American scholars, the English Cixous is widely held to be a feminist theorist whose work betrays poststructuralist thought by lapsing into a backward-looking and dangerous essentialism. Her fiction and drama and the "creative" aspects of her theoretical articles are often overlooked or bracketed. Though the flow has abated, articles tarring the so-called French feminists (Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray are the main targets, though neither Cixous nor Kristeva was born in France) with the brush of essentialism are still appearing, despite the convincing arguments of, among others, Naomi Schor, Barbara Freeman, Rosi Braidotti, and Diana Fuss.¹ However, the discovery that poststructuralist analyses of subjectivity could be applied not only to issues of gender construction but also to such home-grown national issues of racism and classism and therefore that "theory" was not, as it was feared, the exclusive

property of the French but could also be done in English, has diverted attention away from French feminism and stimulated the national scholarly industries in both Britain and the United States.

This discrepancy between the French and the English versions of "Hélène Cixous" becomes all the more striking when one considers Cixous's own national and linguistic roots. While she has made her career primarily in France, in the French language, and also on the strength of the aforementioned translations, Cixous is by birth neither French nor English. She was born in Algeria, a Jew whose mother tongue is German.² Not only has her creative work been insufficiently read and discussed by anglophone feminists, the complexities of her relationship with France as a colonial power and with the French language have not yet, to my knowledge, been adequately taken into account.

Shiach sets out to correct the imbalance within the anglophone context occasioned by this neglect of Cixous's creative writings relative to what I would call the critical overdetermination of her theoretical articles and to put these two elements, as she says, into "some more active relation" (2). Her book comprises an introduction and four chapters. The first chapter briefly examines a few of Cixous's theoretical writings, principally those contained in "Sorties" and "The Laugh of the Medusa." The second chapter surveys Cixous's criticism of Joyce, Hoffman, Kleist, Poe, Freud, and Lispector. The third chapter skims her fiction, and the fourth her drama. To her credit, Shiach does mention in her first chapter the shaping influence upon Cixous of French colonial rule of Algeria, suggesting that

Cixous's earliest recognition of the effects of such hierarchical opposition [form/matter, head/heart, man/woman] took place in relation to the mechanisms of colonialism. Her experience of French rule in Algeria led her to identify a basic structure of power: the Arab population was both necessary to, and despised by, the French colonial power. Algeria, she argues, could never have been "France": it was perceived as different and as dangerous. (7)

Although she rightly notes that Cixous brings her own history to her writing and that her texts about writing are "a compound of the biographical, the strategic, and the theoretical" (26), Shiach does not pursue Cixous's own history or the issue of colonial power relations further, focussing almost exclusively instead upon her texts' philosophic and psychoanalytic implications. For example, although she mentions Cixous's use in her novel *La* of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* and her ongoing interest in the differences between Eastern and Western philosophies and in "challenging the adequacy of Greek legend as a cultural origin" (85), Shiach does not connect Cixous's own background with her theoretical, political, and creative preoccupations. Cixous's position of living and writing from within the borders of the former colonial power remains unexamined, an odd omission in a book subtitled "A Politics of Writing."

In fact, the subtitle invites major difficulties with regard to readerly expectations of this book. I could not help but wonder whether the word "politics" in the subtitle was the publisher's marketing department's imposition rather than the writer's own choice, because there is very little discussion of politics in the book. Nowhere does Shiach explain or justify her use of the term; it seems to be commensurate with Cixous's critique of the dominant forms of thought and rationality, her positing of different structures of historical explanation, and her radical rewriting of concepts of subjectivity, otherness, and the bodily roots of meaning (106). While the political aspects of each of these elements could have been productively spelled out, they are not. Shiach's sense of politics is rather vague and general. In her fourth and final chapter, for example, she assigns a political valence to the mere fact that theatre has temporal and spatial dimensions. At another point, in her discussion of Cixous's novel *Manne*, she observes: "Writing poetry and waging a guerrilla war are not the same, yet *Manne* deals with both at a level of abstraction that renders such distinction almost irrelevant" (104). At the end of that sentence a footnote refers the reader to an interview in which Cixous apparently addresses this important matter, yet Shiach herself does not explore it. In fact, the most sustained discussion of politics *per se* in the book takes place in the few pages in the final chapter about the political interests of Théâtre du Soleil, the company that has performed some of Cixous's plays, presumably as if its politics are allied with, or might even be substituted for, hers. The ironic net effect of Shiach's underdeveloped and elusive use of "politics" is that her book may provide fodder for the arguments that Cixous's work is apolitical and misguidedly so.

Shiach does not address the gap between the French and the English versions of Cixous. It might be a productive starting point, though, to compare the reception of Cixous's work across languages, colonial/postcolonial cultural and intellectual contexts and agendas, and national boundaries and, moreover, to investigate thereby what is meant by and what investments are made in each case in the term "theory." For example, Shiach does not seem to be aware of the useful terms "fiction-theory" or "*fiction théorique*," often invoked in Canadian feminists' discussions of French, Québec, and Canadian feminism. It might also be worthwhile, for instance, to interrogate Cixous's contentious use of the metaphor of woman as "the dark continent," not only in relation to her critique of Freud's usage of it but also in terms of her own early roots in the African continent. That is, there may be valuable contextual and political readings that have been overlooked by casting Cixous as unproblematically "French." It is not just her "feminism" that needs to be analyzed; her adopted nationality, her colonial origins and those of her critics ought to be considered as well. As Bill Readings suggests, the distinguishing feature of literary theory often seems to be a tendency of "always appearing foreign to its hearers" or readers (77).

Readers led by the book's title to look for a sustained engagement with the question of Cixous's politics will find this addition to Cixous criticism disappointing. Unfortunately, Shiach cannot both introduce Cixous the writer to readers who do not read French well enough to read her several subversive, intricate texts in the original and address the vexed question of her politics in a short volume of 161 pages. The book might have been stronger in this regard if a direct and detailed confrontation with other critiques of Cixous's work had been undertaken.

On the other hand, Shiach may well accomplish her desired purpose of provoking readers to explore more of Cixous's texts than the relatively small number that have so far entered into debate. Her book could well function as a source book for thesis, dissertation, and book topics and as a spur to further translations of Cixous's *oeuvre*. In my reading I came across a number of stimulating ideas about Cixous's deconstruction of representation, which, to my regret, remained latent in the text. Reading *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing* one senses more complex and extensive books inside.

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NOTES

- ¹ My article "The Body as Pictogram: Rethinking Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine*" outlines the debate about essentialism before proceeding to discussion of bodies as signifying material.
- ² It may also be worth keeping in mind that Cixous is a professor of *English* literature in France.

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Malcolm Kelsall. *The Great Good Place: The Country House in English Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 1993. pp. xiii, 210. 36 plates. \$32.50.

The continuing importance of the country house in the lives of the English people, for whom visiting a great house remains a favourite pastime, is the theme of Malcolm Kelsall's new book, *The Great Good Place*. It is not as original a study (given the subject) as his earlier book, *Byron's Politics* (1987), but it is equally elegant and erudite, and of wider appeal.

Kelsall is careful to situate himself in his own time and place: having lost an empire as well as their language to the rest of the world, the English turn to the country-house tradition to define their national identity, in ritual fashion, and Kelsall writes its history to explain "how