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**Alison Rice**, *Time Signatures: Contextualizing Contemporary Francophone Autobiographical Writing from the Maghreb*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2006. x + 346 pp. \$90.00 cl/\$29.95 (pb). ISBN 0-739-1129-02.

Review by James A. Winders, Appalachian State University.

Alison Rice's *Time Signatures: Contextualizing Contemporary Francophone Autobiographical Writing from the Maghreb* is an impressive, exceptionally innovative, and beautifully written book that should appeal to literary critics, cultural historians, and to an interdisciplinary readership concerned with such topics as postcolonial cultures, gender, and literary theory. The author's objects of study are three contemporary Francophone writers who share origins in the Maghreb: Assia Djébar (Algeria), Hélène Cixous (Algeria), and Abdelkébir Khatibi (Morocco). All are writers with a complicated relationship to the French language, and Rice demonstrates persuasively that the usual sense of the designation "Francophone" is inadequate to locate them within a contemporary literary landscape. Meanwhile, her book's title, "Time Signatures," is meant to be read in a plural sense. She refers to the temporal dimension both of writing and reading, and to "signature" in the sense of the writers' names. Borrowing from Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, as well as from examples from the three writers she discusses, Rice has much to say about the roles played by proper names and the expectations they create in readers.[1]

But Rice also means for the phrase "Time Signatures" to be understood in its musical sense, and music becomes the most powerfully suggestive aspect of the structure of her book as well as her approach to the texts she considers. The writers she considers straddle the divide between colonial and postcolonial cultures, and Rice, in a chapter on Assia Djébar, borrows Edward Said's (himself a critic much informed by music) concept of "contrapuntal reading," one that would take into account both colonial culture and resistance to it.[2] In lieu of an introduction, she gives us an "Overture," which masterfully introduces the themes the book will explore. To end her book, Rice performs a "cadenza," i.e., an "improvised solo passage" that comments upon the larger work without offering itself as a summation or conclusion. Rice further shows how each writer whose oeuvre she explores, whose literary sensibilities have been formed by bilingual (at least) experience, approaches writing as a kind of "playing." The text, so to speak, is an instrument that must be played just right. The author must "hit the right note." Equally, the reader must seek to "play" the text successfully.

The music these writers seek to capture was formed by the unique accents and dialects within the versions of French they claimed, however tenuously, as their own. Rice says they strive to represent their "mothers' tongues" (e.g., Berber for an Algerian writer) within the French they use. Each of them works with a variety of genres. Assia Djébar (1936-) is celebrated both for her novels and her films, and she has also published scholarly works. She has held teaching positions in Algeria and the United States, and in 2005 was elevated to the Académie Française, where she is one of just three women among the forty *immortels*. Hélène Cixous (1937-) is known for her plays, her philosophical and critical essays, and her autobiographical fiction. In the United States, she is most widely known as the author or co-author of such influential feminist texts as "Le Rire de la Méduse" and *La Jeune née*. Abdelkébir Khatibi (1938-) is a Moroccan novelist, memoirist, and scholar who, like Djébar, has traveled widely. He coined the term "internationalists" to describe people like himself who, as Rice puts it, "don't fit anywhere in particular, but...are, paradoxically, always at home." Khatibi, whose only book to have been translated (by Richard Howard) into English is *Amour bilingue* (1983; *Love in Two Languages*, 1990), has also

written frequently about being someone between two languages, someone for whom French is the language of “the other.”[3]

A complicated relationship with language cannot help but produce a complicated sense and experience of self, and Rice shows how the Francophone writers from the Maghreb she studies have used their writing to examine the paradoxes of self and their status as subjects. Djébar, she argues, projects varied dimensions of her own selfhood onto the characters she creates, thus dispersing and throwing them into relief in ways that revise our usual sense of autobiographical writing. Rice explores similar themes movingly in her chapters on Hélène Cixous, a writer who courageously confronts her conflicted sense of self (as well as linguistic and ethnic complexity) in her writings. For Cixous, the interrogation of self has led her into collaborative writing, and examples of notable co-authors have included Catherine Clément and Jacques Derrida. The two chapters on Clément play a pivotal role in the structure and arrangement of Rice’s book. Rice explains how “orality,” “rhythm,” and “repetition,” form the musical motifs at work in Cixous’s texts. She also calls attention to the author’s use of the word *fugue*, both in its musical sense and in the sense of “flight.” Among other things, “flight” refers to being uprooted from Algeria, coming to France, and taking refuge in writing. Cixous has credited her friendship with Jacques Derrida as decisive in encouraging her own writing. The two of them shared a background as Algerian Jews abandoned by (Vichy) France and yet excluded from any sense of belonging to native Algerian culture, both of them claiming French as writers and yet never feeling that the language was really theirs. Rice points out that Derrida, in several texts, referred to himself as a *marrane* (“Marrano”), someone descended from persecuted Jews who feigned conversion to Christianity while secretly observing Judaism, eventually fleeing Spain for the Maghreb during the fifteenth century. Assia Djébar’s ancestry mirrors the same trajectory, i.e., that of secret practitioners of Islam expelled from Spain by the early seventeenth century.

Throughout *Time Signatures*, Derrida—both as textual theorist and as an example of a writer originally from Algeria—serves as Rice’s frame of reference (She also makes clear a personal debt to him). In her words, he is “a critical interlocutor” with each of her three writers. As an anthropologist might say, Derrida is, for Rice, “good to think.” For many readers, Rice’s book may serve as a useful introduction to the breathtaking interdisciplinary range of Derrida’s later works, which were often far different in tone and political implications from the early works that built his reputation as “deconstructionist.” These texts, especially as they shed light on autobiography, memory, and language, form a kind of prism through which Rice’s critical discussions of Djébar, Cixous, and Khatibi are refracted.

It has often been observed that French theory and criticism in recent decades have blurred the lines between the literary work and its critical counterpart. Like the very writers she profiles, Rice herself achieves a level of style that readers may appreciate on aesthetic grounds even as they benefit from the extensive scholarship that provides the book’s foundation. The care given to the sequencing of the chapters, the successful deployment of musical motifs, and the author’s finely crafted prose all give pleasure as they advance her distinctive and convincing interpretations. Her book’s style and unique arrangement perfectly complement her topic. *Time Signatures* is part of a Lexington Books series called “After the Empire: The Francophone World and Postcolonial France,” a list of works that contribute to the newly emerging, heterogeneous sense historians are getting of contemporary France. France’s former African colonies and immigrants (including writers, musicians, and artists) from them figure prominently within this increasingly visible cultural landscape.

The best studies of Maghrebian immigrants within the Hexagon overcome the rigid stereotyping found within much of the commentary generated by such episodes as the 1989 “headscarf” affair. Those who actually took the trouble to interview young French students who wore the *hajib* found that the girls had no intention of substituting an Arab or Muslim identity for a French one. They did not see the two as mutually exclusive.[4] Just as Alison Rice reminds us that much so-called “Francophone” writing actually emerges from within France, other scholars explore aspects of Arab culture in interaction with

French culture, creating something hybrid that helps to overcome the absolute distinctions between the two.[5] In somewhat similar fashion, recent studies of sub-Saharan African musicians in Paris demonstrate their eager embrace of French identity without renunciation of African roots. Many see themselves as world citizens,[6] close to Khatibi's concept of "internationalists."

In her "cadenza," Alison Rice argues that Djébar, Cixous, and Khatibi all make use of their roots (in family, language, and geography) to create new and original literary effects in the French language. She calls their works "syncopated forms of testimony." "Syncopated" is a perfect word to use for writings that bring together African origins and contemporary French literature, and it is fitting that it appears at the close of a book that so successfully employs a musical frame of reference for the author's timely subject. It is also nicely applicable to the layered rhythms of this most remarkable book.

## NOTES

[1] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London, 1997); Jacques Derrida, "H.C. pour la vie, c'est à dire..." in Hélène Cixous croisées d'une oeuvre, Mireille Calle-Gruber, ed., (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2000), pp. 13-140; Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *De l'hospitalité: Anne Dufourmantelle invite Jacques Derrida à répondre* (Paris: Calmann Lévi, 1997); Geoffrey Bennington, "The Proper Name," in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 104-114.

[2] Edward W. Said, "Discrepant Experiences," *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1994), pp. 31-43.

[3] Abdelkhebir Khatibi, *Amour bilingue* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1983); English edition is *Love in Two Languages*, trans., Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

[4] Françoise Gaspard and Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Le Foulard et la république* (Paris: La Découverte, 1995)

[5] As examples, see David A. McMurray, "La France arabe," in **Post-Colonial Cultures in France**, Alec G. Hargreaves and Mark McKinney, eds., (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 26-39, and Paul A. Silverstein, *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race, and Nation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

[6] See James A. Winders, "Mobility and Cultural Identity: African Music and Musicians in Late-Twentieth-Century Paris," *French Historical Studies* 29:3 (Summer 2006): 483-508 and *Paris African: Rhythms of the African Diaspora* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

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