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A Radical Reading of Cixous: A Body of/at Work

If woman has always functioned “within” the discourse of man, a signifier which has always referred back to the opposite signifier. . . it is time for her to dislocate this “within,” to explode it, turn it around, make it hers, containing it, taking it in her mouth, biting that tongue (*langue*) with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language (*langue*) to get inside of.

Helene Cixous, “The Laugh of Medusa” (1880)

In his pivotal lecture, “Structure, Sign, and Play” Jacques Derrida outlines the post-structural argument against a purely structural conception of language and reality. While he acknowledges the arbitrary, constructed connection between a word (sign) and the concept (the signified)—terms coined by structuralist Ferdinand De Saussure—he argues that the system of signification simply replaces the dominant organizing structure of Western thought with another rigid system. This theoretical focus on linguistics and structural dynamics leads to an examination of the “matter/meaning binary and its related oppositions of object/subject, nature/culture, woman/man” (Kaiser 278). The Western Dualism, which feminism and post-structuralism work against, attempts to close the gap between mind and matter by relying on some fixed knowledge. It “centered around the impossible but irresistible search for a fundamental truth or Logos. Derrida calls this search ‘Logocentrism’ (Norton 1867). Helene Cixous is a female post-structuralist author in the same period. Literary scholar Birgit Mara Kaiser sees Cixous as working “in alliance with Derrida’s explorations of writing” (279). Both writers complicate the notion that theory must privilege one half of the matter/meaning binary.

However, within the circles of post-structuralism and feminism, Cixous's distinctly "feminine writing" sparks debates. Some readers accuse Cixous of "promoting essentialism—that is, of equating female writing with an idealized and unhistoricized femininity. . .affirming some sort of 'essence' of woman (1868)." I, too, was among the critics interpreting her argument as essentialist. In my first essay about Cixous, I took a critical position, writing: "Even in all her effort 'to break up, to destroy' the male-centered system, Cixous's definitions of 'true' women reinforces the divide. Though she claims there is 'no general woman, no one typical woman,' she draws a hard rule regarding the female experience and how it is articulated." Birgit Mara Kaiser challenges this reading. In "So Many Tongues: Cixous and the Matter of Writing," Kaiser makes the case for the radical feminism of Cixous by exploring the nuanced way Cixous conceives of feminine writing through its own mutable and material language, connected to the physical body. To read Cixous through Kaiser's lens, she warns that "one must be prepared to depart from the conventional separation of matter and meaning" (281). In doing so, the reader finds that reality (matter) is not fixed, but constantly changing, just as meaning is constantly being constructed. Therefore, there are no clear-cut turns to/from material or language, rather we must question that binary by discovering the materiality *of* language. This concept, for the purposes of my analysis and as I understand it in Kaiser's piece, refers to the inseparability of words and the physical reality generated from language. As a reader and a writer myself, I've heeded Kaiser's call. In a closer reading of Cixous, I found a deeper alignment of language with my material life and a greater understanding of myself as a writer.

Kaiser's explicates her argument in three steps; this paper will address the first and third sections which provide a new framework to examine questions of materiality, signification, and the subject in Cixous. The first step asserts that Cixous's work "foregrounds the materiality of

language and shows that it is indispensable to, inseparable from, and active as signification” (279). She bases her analysis in Cixous’s 1975 essay “The Laugh of Medusa” and its conception of “feminine” writing, rather than adopting the “self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallogentrism” of a history of writing and logical thought linked to the power symbol of the male phallus (Cixous 1872). Kaiser rightfully grounds her study in Cixous’s first (read: mother) language of French; in the original text, “Cixous makes a crucial distinction between *dans* and *dedans* (the English translation renders this as ‘within’ and ‘inside’)” (280). She refers explicitly to the section of “The Laugh of Medusa” which is quoted as the epigraph of this essay. As if addressing her critics, Cixous demands that feminine writing does not take place *within* the “patriarchal discourse” and “leave the binary logic itself untouched (Kaiser 280). Rather, the “inside” status grants a certain power to create a new discourse, a strength gained from interiority. It helps me to think of the difference in Virginia Woolf’s terms. There’s a difference in being within a room full of men and being inside “a room of one’s own”. The material discrepancy of the words requires a more disruptive reading. From the “inside of” language, Cixous forges a path for the “new insurgent writing” of women. (Cixous 1873). She argues that “by writing her self, woman will return to the body,” and to the “marvelous text of her self that she must urgently learn to speak” (Cixous 1873). In the physical act of speaking for and by herself, a woman learns to read/write her own identity.

Cixous’s insurgency relies on another rhetorical illusion. When she writes: “biting that tongue (*langue*) with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language (*langue*) to get inside of,” the French word *langue* signifies the tongue of a body and a language (1880). The double entendre of *langue* as tongue and language is a crucial move lost in the translation, which just reinforces the notion that our reality is inseparable from the language we speak and read.

Because I read and think in English, my interpretation of the text was limited. Kaiser pays special attention to this tension. She argues that Cixous “complicates these disentanglements by making langue in/determinately both at the same time: material and signifying, tongue/language, bodylanguage” (Kaiser 281). If the same physical sign has more than one meaning, there must be a more nuanced way to approach the materiality of language.

Reading this analysis sent me on my own discoveries about the connection between the body and written language. Why do we assign corporeal status to writing? What does it mean for an argument to “have teeth”? Why do we call an author’s writing their “body of work” or “corpus of fiction”? We even model our papers in “body paragraphs,” presupposing a physical substance to a written text, perhaps without knowing it. This simple thought exercise reveals the connection Kaiser and Cixous are making—There is no simple distinction between the body being written, and the body that is writing. Indeed, Kaiser writes that Cixous “mobilizes the writing/written body so that the body is not a stable physique prior to language. . . and thereby deeply unsettles the binaries of nature/culture, matter/meaning, materiality/signification, woman/man from *inside*” (281, emphasis added).

Some of Kaiser’s strongest points come in her title-granting relation of the “matter of writing” to “matter” as a scientific, physical concept. She quotes feminist quantum physicist Karen Barad who affirms “the entanglement of body/language or matter/meaning” by characterizing matter as “always shifting, reconfiguring, differentiating itself” (281). While I could only dream of being a feminist quantum physicist, my first science lesson on matter helps illustrate her point about transformation. I remember learning that water can take on the material forms of a liquid, a solid, or a gas. Although the chemical substance remains H₂O, each form requires a new name. Therefore, an endless change in material form necessitates a

resistance to single meaning in language. Cixous asks us to imagine writing in this way, giving rise to a female language, which “does not contain, it carries” (1882). Like matter, “she’s everywhere; she exchanges” (Cixous 1885).

Kaiser then employs materiality/signification to address the question of the “subject” in writing. I read the “subject” to mean one person’s perspective, the identities they bring to a text and the way the text changes as a result. From my knowledge of Roland Barthes’s “Death of the Author (1967)” I assumed the “subject” would not align with post-structuralism’s adherence to strictly textual analysis and concern for readers, rather than authorial meaning. Yet, another work of Barthes offers a metaphor for understanding what he at first seems to oppose. In “From Work to Text,” he describes a text as “a tissue, a woven fabric,” in which you can “follow” threads of meaning (Barthes 1279). The same metaphor can be applied to Cixous and her championing of the subject, where feminine writing focuses not on a singular, “essential woman” but can access “everything we don’t know we can be” (1886). Feminine writing then stands apart as an individual process of discovery inside a woven fabric of written/writing bodies. In her final sentence, she embraces female solidarity and refutes the Freudian psychoanalysis so vital to phallogentrism, stating: “In one another, we will never be lacking” (Cixous 1886). By empowering so many forms of female voices, Cixous “unworks conventional notions of the subject and might permit us to think of subjectivation as multi-voiced, continuously materializing differentiation.” (Kaiser 280) Kaiser also portrays Cixous as maintaining a post-structural concern for the reader as part of the subjectivation process; language does not have a reality until it is given meaning. Kaiser writes that readers should be “participating in the texts’ and the world’s articulation, in the generativity of matter/meaning in ways more profound than ‘interpretation’ suggests” (293).

Most of Western thought exists only in writing, and our reality is wrapped up in the text. Cixous joins mind and matter by acknowledging the construction of reality by a language that evades a single truth or meaning. They are not inherently or naturally “fixed,” but matter and meaning are now inextricably connected. The fact that I must turn in a physical copy of this paper means that the impact of my ideas rests on the ability to give meaning to material. Books are material. Written language is material. And we, our physical selves, materialize from the generative capabilities *inside* women. Kaiser concludes her piece by bringing us back to the beginning, thereby modeling the reproductive process. Kaiser makes the connection. “As Cixous writes, ‘A woman’s body. . . will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language’” (Kaiser 293). We come from a woman’s body, and the language most formative on our written/writing bodies—and therefore, our material reality is aptly named the “mother tongue.”

This contemporary engagement of scholars like Kaiser and those she cites matters because it asks us to reexamine our own internalization of a binary system of language and power. This scholarship asks every reader to redirect attention to the writing of Cixous, mining it for radical insight we may have missed in our insistence that there is a “correct” way to be a feminist or to challenge societal paradigms. In the beginning of this Critical Theory course, we were asked “What changes the world? Ideas or material?” As we shared our answers, we performed the binary of logocentrism, the separation of mind and matter. Some students saying “Ideas! We’re English majors!” while others privileged the physical reality and inventions which spurred modernization. I, visibly conflicted, flipped back and forth. What I did not realize at the time is that the answer I wanted to say was “both.” This perspective I have after reading Kaiser, rereading Cixous, and engaging in my own feminine writing gives me confidence in that answer.

The only way to dismantle the binary is to refuse it, never replacing one hierarchy for another. While the theory can be dense and confusing, as students of literature we participate in the materiality of language every single day.

In the physical act of reading the texts and writing this paper, I've actualized the written body/writing body concept. When I read, my hand scribbles a note in the margin, my eyes scan the pages and squint at confusing passages. The act of writing demands an even greater level of physical engagement. After hours crouched over my computer or hand-writing outlines and notes to myself, my body needs a break. I take a walk around campus or do something mundane around my house. But often, that change of scenery is not enough. The words, once formed as a thought in my head, demand that I put them into matter. Much of this paper was written in the middle of the night when I physically could not sleep because the words had to be put down. This whole-body method of writing is not a Romantic, Wordsworthian overflow of feelings. It is the hard work of wrestling with and paying homage to so many voices which inform my own. I now understand that writing is not the act of copying down what I was already thinking or something that already exists. Rather, it is a recursive, never-ending process of composing myself and generating meaning in the material world of language.

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