

The Body Project: Anatomy, Relationships, and Representation
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Écriture Féminine: Thinking the Female Body through Writing

Traditional feminist readings of Hélène Cixous's theory of *écriture féminine* have centered on the essentialist debate, overlooking the important contribution to gender studies her theoretical work constitutes. In this paper I will explore how *écriture féminine* is useful to theorizing the female body as narrative. Promising to "speak about women's writing: about what it will do," Cixous, in "The Laugh of the Medusa," exhorts women to write, insisting that only through writing will "woman . . . return to the body, which has been more than confiscated by her" (2039, 2043). Central to understanding Cixous's project are several key issues which I will explore in light of theorizing the body: firstly, what does Cixous understand by the terms "masculine" and "feminine" and what does this definition imply for theorizing the body? Secondly, how does Cixous understand writing to be sexed? In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous speaks of masculine and feminine writing, maintaining "unequivocally that there is such a thing as marked writing," and that this "marked" writing carries the trace of the masculine or feminine in it, is inscribed as the surface of the body itself with gendered binaries which speak the truth of the body (2042). Given this definition of writing as sexed in and through the libidinal economy which produces it, Cixous argues that *écriture féminine* will write the female body which has been marginalized, silenced, and repressed by the phallogocentric symbolic order. What I am most interested in accomplishing here is an understanding of how Cixous' literalizing of the marginalized binary (dark, mother, nature, etc) in *écriture féminine* is helpful to theorizing the female body as capable of exploding gender binaries. Finally, what constitutes *écriture féminine*? Cixous asserts problematically that both men and women may write *écriture féminine*, though she denies that it may be theorized, explaining that it cannot be "enclosed" or "coded," and offering only hints of what it looks like in practice (Blyth 19). For Cixous, feminine writing flies through phallogocentric boundaries, through the lack, the dreaded fear of the abyss, to write a female body unconstrained by gendered binaries. In this way, *écriture féminine* does not so much seek to subvert patriarchal discourse as to explode it, and thereby to create a space for the female body, which has been silenced, marginalized, oppressed, to signify; feminine writing is thus a bringing of the female body to language as well as a thinking of the female body through language. To summarize, finally, my project will argue that Cixous's theoretical contribution, *écriture féminine*, presents a means to (re)think the female body, and as such, may be understood to constitute a politics of writing which seeks to deconstruct the dominant phallogocentric discourse.