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Disrupting Phallic Logic: (Re)thinking the Feminine with H el ene Cixous and Bracha Ettinger

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ABSTRACT

This article brings into dialogue the writings of H el ene Cixous and Bracha Ettinger. I contend that Cixous’s writing unsettles the very questions that form the basis for Ettinger’s key theoretical propositions, making for a productive dialogue between these two feminist thinkers. I identify key concepts and convergences that, when considered together, offer a novel methodology for thinking our way out of a conceptual impasse in which the ‘feminine’ exists either as a lack vis- a-vis the masculine or as unthinkable. What makes this meeting of works particularly generative is their ability to slide under the phallogocentricity of Language to approach an ethics of the Other. A Cixousian reclamation of the feminine, coupled with Ettinger’s theorisation of subjectivity, in which the feminine is not foreclosed, offers to feminist debate and criticism an Other axis of sexual difference accessible to all living subjects. Considered together, Cixous’s and Ettinger’s formulations offer radical potentialities for reading *with*: that is, not a process in which we read as I’s positioned in opposition to an Other, but rather, one in which text and reader co-exist. Such a mode contests the violence that is done by phallic disciplinary structures and indifferent practices of reading.

KEYWORDS

Subjectivity; feminine; psychoanalysis; de-phallicising; de-disciplining; H el ene Cixous; Bracha Ettinger

Introduction

Within feminist theory in general, and feminist theory and psychoanalytical theory in particular, concepts of the feminine (*le f eminin*), feminine subjectivity, and sexual difference have been richly explored and energetically contested (Braidotti 2003; Casarino and Righi 2018; Cavarero and Bertolino 2008; Grosz 1990, 2005; Wilson 2014). Sexual difference, as a theoretical and indeed an aesthetic question, is closely allied to analysing language and textuality as well as theorisations of subjectivity.¹ Accepted understandings of the latter are deeply rooted in a Western paradigm and bound to the European crisis of subjectivity, conceptualisations of which historically exclude the feminine. How, then, can we even think the feminine – as a non-Phallic axis of difference – within feminist debate and criticism without exploring concepts of subjectivity that acknowledge its existence? This article brings into dialogue the writings of feminist writer and literary critic, H el ene

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Cixous and artist and psychoanalyst, Bracha Ettinger to offer a new framing for feminist debate and criticism in which *the feminine*, via a new reading of the body and the positing of an Other axis of sexual difference, is centred. Cixous's writings offer a specific theorisation of our exile within and from language. Cixous looks upon the act of writing as a ground for exploring the subject and her writing unsettles and opens up the radical possibilities in language for *thinking the feminine* prior to a theorisation of subjectivity in which the feminine had not been foreclosed. Ettinger's innovative theory of the Matrixial departs from existing concepts of subjectivity, positing a supplementary dimension in subjectivity that is not premised on the opposition of self and other alone, not based on splitting and separation, not based on difference as a mode of constituting the hierarchy of the one and its other. The philosophical and psychoanalytic writings of Cixous and Ettinger critique conservative psychoanalytic tendencies by interrupting phallic logic. This timely pairing attends to critical questions for feminist debate and criticism that have been repeatedly obscured by structures of disciplining at work in the canonising and institutionalisation of intellectual sites of thinking, that is, the question of the *feminine* as a non-Phallic axis of difference and in turn the unfinished question of sexual difference.²

Reclaiming the Feminine

Throughout this discussion, I use the feminine (*le féminin*) as a concept located in psychoanalytical and aesthetic thought. My use of the term opposes that which collapses the feminine into femaleness; I use the term both to situate my discussion within Cixous's and Ettinger's original formulations and to refer to a writing historically marginalised through forms of repression and silencing by the ruling phallic socio-linguistic order. To tease apart what it means to think the feminine, I will turn briefly to early works by Cixous to address the specificity of the feminine as a concept and its foreclosure in conservative psychoanalytic formulations of subjectivity. As with sexual difference, for Cixous and Ettinger, the feminine is intricately tied to the analysis of language and textuality. In 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976), one of Cixous's earlier works, she speaks of a feminine that is in the process of extricating itself from connotations and meanings imposed upon the word under a discourse which has formerly refuted its agency. For Cixous, it is by writing the feminine that the foreclosure and silencing of the feminine can be countered. Her formulation of *what it is to write* is initiated through an exploration of the textuality – the undecidability – of writing:

Writing is working; being worked; questioning (in) the between (letting oneself be questioned) of same *and* of other without which nothing lives; undoing death's work by willing the togetherness of one-another, infinitely charged with a ceaseless exchange of one with another – not knowing one another and beginning again only from what is most distant, from self, from other, from the other within. A course that multiplies transformations by the thousands. (2001, 86)

At the point where the text eludes definitive interpretation, textuality – undecidability – occurs. For Cixous, feminine writing stems from the life drive and her use of the signifier 'feminine' should be understood in this context. Verena Andermatt Conley (1991, xii) offers a useful reading of Cixous's feminine which, she says, 'can be read as the living,

as something that cannot be pinned down, controlled or even conceptualized'. Unlike other formulations of textuality and undecidability which have long been subject to analysis among literary critics and theorists, the specificity of the feminine is a central focus in Cixous's writing which, I use, even as it exceeds or disrupts any formulation. The Cixousian feminine is, according to Conley (xii) 'a drive to life – always related to otherness, which, though it may begin in death, tends towards life – that endows Cixous's writing with force'.

The implicit reclamation of the word '*feminine*' evidenced by Cixous's textual play in early writings such as *The Newly Born Woman* (2001), originally published as *Le jeune née* in 1975 and 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976) is *working/worked/being worked* through translation – *écriture féminine* translates as 'writing feminine' not feminine writing. Such textual play asks us to question what the smallest difference brings to bear in our reading practices as feminist scholars. Cixous's writing of *voler* – the French verb means both to fly and to steal – asks us to puzzle over what difference emerges and what that difference signifies through the displacement and shifting of meaning that occurs in the act of writing. It is precisely the moment in which difference surfaces that intricate care and attention should be paid to Cixous's language – of *jouissance* – in which the feminine comes to signify, among other things, a corporeal rendering of the writing and a textual rendering of the feminine in *écriture féminine*.³ Equating *jouissance* with the feminine moves Cixous's word play into an expanded space in which sensorial delight rises as we attempt to make meaning through a process of cognitive, visual, aural and textual translation. To write the feminine, then, drawing on this formulation, is to be engaged in a process of ongoing translation between the corporeal, the aesthetic, and language. It is, I suggest, in the weaving or plaiting together of these textual elements that engagement with the *erotogeneity* of Cixous's writing, that is, writing as continuum, as unyielding flow, is initiated and sustained. Cixous's embodied writing stretches itself out to those raw, visceral moments of encounter we experience as subjects in the world, carefully elaborating the idea of body-as-text/text-as-body. Articulating how the body is 'already text', Cixous says:

I don't 'begin' by 'writing': I don't write. Life becomes text starting out from my body. I am already text. History, love, violence, time, work, desire inscribe it in my body, I go where the 'fundamental language' is spoken, the body language into which all tongues of things, acts and beings translate themselves, in my own breast, the whole of reality worked upon in my flesh, intercepted by my nerves, by my senses, by the labour of all my cells, projected, analysed, recomposed into a book. (1991, 52)

The embodiedness of Cixous's writing, its textual playfulness, invokes echoes of Ettinger's philosophy, the language of which initiates a different relation to words and textuality. Ettinger's intervention in classic psychoanalysis is intricately linked to her language – she creates terms that are perplexing to phallic logic and in which there is a shared zone of transmissibility. The power of her play with language has been eloquently captured by Giffney, Mulhall and O'Rourke (2009, 2) in 'Seduction into Reading', in which the authors describe Ettinger's language as 'an *event*'. Ettinger invites us to question what specific resources and discourses can be drawn on for a feminist reading practice which acknowledges the existence of the feminine as another axis of sexual difference when we interrupt phallic logic by bending, shaping, and twisting language. When we are inside of language,

in which a poetics in the feminine can reside, which transformations become possible? The Matrix invents, in language, a way to think the feminine in its creation of a space that Griselda Pollock (as quoted in Giffney, Mulhall, and O'Rourke 2009, 3), clearly borrowing and extending a Cixousian *écriture*, refers to as a '*matrixial écriture*'. The weaving together of metaphor, neologisms, the bending, twisting and creation of a supplementary language allows us to glimpse difference through the rupture and unsettling of that very order that is hostile to our attempts to think the feminine.

De-Disciplining and De-Phallicising Classic Psychoanalysis

Bringing Cixous and Ettinger together to further examine this notion of a *matrixial écriture* helps us to understand the manner in which the feminine operates and surfaces in writing. Before I discuss the specific Ettingerian concepts drawn on in this article, I will briefly contextualise Ettinger's theoretical project. The purpose of my discussion is to provide context and should not be read as an explication of her intricately complex conceptual moves, each of which is situated within already existing theoretical structures which have been slowly elaborated over the last thirty years. Ettinger first developed her theory of the Matrix by engaging aspects of Lacan's late texts and her work is built in part on his specialist vocabulary and the concepts he added to psychoanalysis. Ettinger works *with* and also *beyond the limits that she identifies* in Lacan's theoretical formulations of language. It is not my purpose to engage with Lacan's theory as part of this discussion. My analysis is focused on what happens in language once we introduce the analytical and ethical implications for feminist theory and criticism of an alliance between Cixous's and Ettinger's formulations of the feminine.

Ettinger's theory of the Matrix is a theory of subject formation in which the feminine is not foreclosed. The Matrix, a supplementary, *matrixial* dimension of subjectivity based on *severality*, is a radical intervention in psychoanalytic and philosophical thought. The Matrix is not a symbol of the feminine, but a Symbol of the dimension of the feminine beyond the Phallus that is shared by all. The Matrix makes the feminine *thinkable* and should be understood as a symbol organising a field of meaning and a dimension of subjectivity. Its logic does not provide for a rejection of the phallus which, Ettinger admits, is necessary for our becoming speaking subjects. However, she challenges the role of the phallus as the sole organiser of all dimensions of meaning. She is thus building on Lacan's intervention in psychoanalysis by stressing the significance of language in the formation of subjectivity: the subject is a speaking being.⁴ Yet she is also taking up Lacan's admission that there is a dimension, beyond the phallus, which he identified with the feminine as that which the phallus makes us unable to 'think'. Ettinger, posing the Matrix as a Symbol in the same terms that Lacan proposes the Phallus, seeks to separate the equation between symbol and phallus. She is theorising a supplementary dimension *within* subjectivity. To situate her dissociation of the symbol from the phallus, we need to pass through the Oedipal Complex.

The Matrix speaks to gaps in the dominant hegemonic structuring of a singular subjectivity that underpins classic psychoanalysis, in which sexual difference is understood as solely the effect of castration by which are produced different positions for masculine and feminine subjects. For Lacan, the subject – and in turn culture – is constructed through processes of subject formation which take place in the Lacanian Triad of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, marked by a sexual division signified through the Phallus (as symbol).⁵ As

Elizabeth Grosz (1990, 126) explicates, the Phallus is 'a crucial signifier in the distribution of power [that] represents the Name-of-the-Father (*Nom-du-Père*), through which the subject is positioned in culture'. As such it operates as the marker of sexual difference which ironically is the signifier of *lack* that is only projected onto the negative term in sexual difference, the feminine. Castration is bound up in the Oedipal Complex which, according to classic psychoanalysis, feminine subjects never resolve. Gayle Rubin's (1975) examination of the formation of sex and gender through an analysis of the Oedipal Complex offers a useful pathway into this position from which we can then understand more clearly the stakes of Ettinger's proposition for psychoanalysis.⁶

Rubin describes castration as an anxiety about mutilation and loss that dissolves (for the son) the phallic stage, precipitating the subject into latency alignment with two positions in the Oedipal triangle. Rubin outlines the ways in which the Oedipal Complex is experienced by different sexes. The boy assumes two positions in this Complex: identification with the father as a *subject* and love of the mother as an *object*, as does the girl through identification with the mother as a *subject* and love of the father as an *object*. Working out the conflicting impulses that arise in each position can take the form of the positive – what Freud termed 'true' – or negative Oedipal relationship. Rubin explains the experience of the Oedipal Complex for the girl, explicating the ways in which the feminine is rendered an empty space in this paradigm. Without the symbolic token, there are very real effects for the girl – and later woman – leading to a redirection towards the father. In this formulation, the feminine is heterosexualised.

Tracing the term in this manner presents us with the question: if this is the only account we are left with, what happens to the feminine? In a world in which cultural meaning possesses the subject – we can only exist in the terms that we are presented with – what happens when the feminine is left as an empty space? Since classic psychoanalysis only conceives the feminine as firstly the mother of infancy and then the rejected mother of Oedipus, placing the girl in the position of rejecting the mother as well and wanting the phallus-baby from the Father, what does the Matrix offer to those who want to pursue the question of (and give expression to) the feminine? The Matrix moves beyond deconstructive renderings of an exclusive self/other binary. Ettinger maintains, as have other thinkers before her,⁷ that if we are to continue to position Oedipal sexual difference as the key to feminine sexual difference, and indeed, if we continue to situate the feminine in Lacanian terms as Woman/Other/Thing, we will remain confined to a phallogocentric model of thinking.⁸ What does Ettinger's theorisation offer to this problematic?

Working from Lacan's insistence on the subject as an effect of the signifier, Ettinger's theorisation of the Matrix, with metramorphosis as its mode of meaning-making, contests the model of the Phallus as the only signifier by proposing a subjectivity that is based on *severality* and encounter. Ettinger proposes the Matrix as:

a basic but not exclusive symbol for the feminine, a symbol for a non-phallic sphere of a not-one-ness (more-than-one but not everything and/or less-than-one but not nothing), which includes a recognized unknown. The Matrix is composed of the known and the unknown; it is a meeting place for the co-emerging I and the non-I(s) in the Matrix. It is the becoming threshold of borderlines. (1992, 197)

Let me stress that in this formation, everything Ettinger is saying is calculated to interrupt phallic logic. The Matrix marks a theoretical leap in its formulation of a becoming in

severality which Ettinger elsewhere refers to as *subjectivity-as-encounter*, a concept based on an originary or primary encounter within a primordially shared dimension. While not displacing the phallic from its necessary psychic and linguistic functions, Ettinger supplements classic theories of subjectivity with the concept of a primordial proto-subjectivising, proto-ethical *encounter-event* that is premised on *subjectivity-as-encounter* and on *severality*. The Matrix, which co-exists alongside the later phallic stratum, is concerned not with the fixed boundaries of a phallic structure but bypasses the Phallus in its desire for *jointness* with an Other. The process of *becoming* elaborated in Ettinger's thought is premised on a subjectivity that is based on *severality* and linked to the maternal feminine in what she calls '*differentiation-in-co-emergence*' (2006b, 181). This archaic dimension of subjectivity is termed *matrixial* and it posits a matrixial feminine as a sexual difference that precedes phallic formation and sexual differencing (plus/minus) but persists as the affective foundations for post-natal ethical and aesthetic processes and thus shifts the phallic paradigm, unsettling its deluded sovereignty over all aspects of subjectivity. Ettinger's theorisation offers a supplementary dimension of subjectivity for *all born subjects* by challenging the Phallus as the only symbol that organises subjectivity while simultaneously introducing a redefinition of the feminine as a presence in all subjectivity.

This originary encounter which impacts on all who have been born has, however, specific implications for the feminine subject.⁹ That is to say, it relieves the feminine subject's exile in the phallogocentric precisely because of the premise that subjectivity is primordially *several* and that all are co-emerging and linked to the maternal feminine. An alliance between Cixous and Ettinger has significant implications for feminist debate and criticism. The ongoing translation between the corporeal, the aesthetic, and language carefully woven together in Cixous's feminine writing which stems from the life drive and stretches itself out to moments of encounter we experience as subjects in the world, and the proposition of a supplementary dimension of subjectivity each initiate a *de-disciplining* and *de-phallicising* of classic psychoanalysis. For example, twentieth-century feminist debate and criticism, seeking to undo the bind in which we found ourselves as a result of the Oedipal structure, struggled to negotiate the Freudian and Lacanian, in that they appeared to offer an analysis of how that structure worked but they could not offer a release from it. It is imperative that we acknowledge the gravity of the radical possibilities of the twentieth century. However, feminist criticism, still operating within an Oedipal framework, risked being bound to a model premised on castration and lack, the end result of which is the foreclosure of the feminine. Later debates around gender, performativity, fluidity and the dissolution of the feminine/masculine binary further complicated the unfinished question of sexual difference and reinvigorated an exploration of the feminine and the *possibility of the feminine* as a non-Phallic axis of difference.¹⁰ Drawing on matrixial revisions to theories of subjectivity, alongside a Cixousian formulation of the feminine, we can supplement the phallogocentric psychoanalytical proposition of 'singular' subjectivity which, feminist critics have argued, creates the asymmetry of the One and its Other.

A Supplementary Language

Sara Ahmed (2017, 6) argues that a 'feminist movement is built from many moments of beginning again'; placing Ahmed's words in the context of feminist debate and criticism serves as a reminder of the importance of re-vision as an 'act of survival'

(Rich 1972), of the urgency for feminist debate and criticism to look back, to see with fresh eyes, to enter the old from new critical directions. Cixous's textual reclamation of the feminine and Ettinger's theorisation of a subjectivity that does not foreclose the feminine offers an opportunity to re-evaluate how we approach language and texts and to work our way around the structural impasse in which language has so often been reduced to mere representation in classic psychoanalysis. I would like to build on my earlier discussion of Cixous's intervention in language by drawing attention to the multiplicity of language in her writing, itself a reworking, *with* and *beside* the Derridean concept of *différance*. Cixous utilises etymology as a way of reclaiming words, freeing them from their patriarchal connotations and ideological underpinnings. Her formulation of *étymolorgiaque*, a neologism that merges 'etymology' with 'orgy' is particularly powerful in its elevation of the erotic and the sensual and its liberation of language from strict patriarchal norms. The significance of the union between flesh and word in Cixous's writing is captured by Françoise Defromont:

Their union gives birth to a new word in this prolific chain woven into a polysemic language. But is it a union or a fusion? For this neologism, this newborn word melted into a new mould, could very well live on; it comes out of a musical mould shaping words to be heard as sounds – as though the process taking place were something of a fusion. I shall call it the embrace of the tongues of ecstasy. The fleshy tongue becomes one with the linguistic tongue, for in French there is a word, flesh and language, sound and meaning. (1990, 122)

Contemplating Cixous's writing as one of *étymolorgiaque* which seeks to bring together the word and the whole self, the fleshy self, the body as full cultural dimension to the page, resonates with what I have previously named the *tongueliness* of her texts, where tongue is considered the poetic fabric of the texts.¹¹ In *Coming To Writing*, Cixous describes the convergence of fleshy tongue and language that produces a textual economy *in* and *of* the feminine:

Writing to touch with letters, with lips, with breath, to caress the tongue, to lick with the soul, to taste the blood of the beloved body, of life in its remoteness; to saturate the distance with desire; in order to keep it from reading you. (1991, 4)

These words gesture toward that ineffable encounter between text and subject in the performance of 'meaning' encapsulated within the fleshiness of the word as it passes through the body. The closeness of the voice to the fleshiness of language is carried in the interconnectedness of sound and meaning as the feminine text is inscribed with '*tactility*' as touch 'passes through the ear'. Cixous says,

Writing in the feminine is passing on what is cut out by the Symbolic, the voice of the mother, passing on what is most archaic. The most archaic force that touches a body is one that enters by the ear and reaches the most intimate point. This innermost touch always echoes in a woman-text. So the movement, the movement of the text, doesn't trace a straight line. (1981, 54)

It is that *other* elsewhere in which the feminine is invoked that captures my attention, tells me to turn a word over and over with my tongue, to sound it out, allowing its pattern to emerge. *Feeling the word in my mouth. Playing with the word.* In the process of cognitive, visual, aural, and textual translation necessary to engage with the profundity Cixous's

writing generates, the feminine surfaces, for the process of translating words in multiple ways renders meaning, cognitive and sensorial, perpetually deferred. There is no originary site of meaning, words in translation undulate with layers of meaning. As Raquelle K. Bostow (2019, 806) puts it, 'sexual difference cannot be seen, but rather is experienced through sensory engagement' with Cixous's texts. It is not, then, unsurprising when Cixous tells us that a feminine practice of writing cannot be defined for it very clearly lies outside of the reasoning machine in which the word, *logos*, the founding fathers of psychoanalysis sit. To theorise that which is considered unthinkable in a universal, phallogocentric model – that there might be something else in the Real that is not signified by the phallogocentric Symbolic – requires the creation of a supplementary language through the invention of new terms and concepts. Notably, in the preface to the new edition of 'Le Rire de La Méduse' titled 'Un effet d'épine rose' Cixous (2010, 32) queers the figure of the Medusa, referring to Medusa as the 'queen des queers'.¹² Cixous's queering of Medusa represents the nonnormative, a concept present in the 1976 publication, as Bostow outlines

Cixous's rehabilitation of the Medusa via queerness functions as a demand for inclusivity within the twenty-first-century socio-political landscape. Rather than advocate only on behalf of women, the Medusa represents a valorization of the 'nonnormative' – all who are marginalized for their supposedly deviant forms of embodiment. Yet, this adopted vocabulary highlights the queerness embedded in her Medusa figure from the beginning: '*Nous re-penserons la femme depuis toutes les formes et tous les temps de son corps*' (Cixous 44). Medusa was always a shape-shifter, a woman who reconfigures normative understandings of sexuality and sexual difference with each new reading. (2019, 808–809)

It is at the point where a phallogocentric model of language is rendered redundant and vocabularies expanded, that the theories of Cixous and Ettinger converge. Much like the perpetual *becoming* of Medusa, queen des queers, the etymological and metaphorical meaning of the name given to Ettinger's theoretical project must be understood in the sense of *becoming* that underpins matrixial theory. Borrowing from the Latin *mātrīc* or *mātrīx*, the term 'matrix' is defined in the *OED* as a:

Supporting or enclosing structure.

A place or medium in which something is originated, produced, or developed; the environment in which a particular activity or process begins; a point of origin and growth.

In Ettinger's (1996, 125) formulation, the Matrix is a symbolic concept existing in and of itself, preceding gender. As such, Ettinger emphasises that it is 'at the service of both sexes [and] it should not be reduced to the womb, just as the *phallus* should not be reduced to the penis'. In other words, Ettinger's theorisation of subjectivity is *matrixial* and not maternal. The use of the term 'Matrix' is a significant linguistic tool which challenges the phallic narcissism of Freud's androcentric conception of femininity. It emphasises development, growth and becoming, operating as a symbol of sexual difference. Phallogocentric language must be interrupted in order for this Other difference to be glimpsed at its poetic margins precisely because the logic of Language is coincident with the logic of the phallic. As with Cixous's textual play, Ettinger's creation of terms and neologisms symbolise the invention, in language, of her theoretical project. Giffney, Mulhall, and O'Rourke (2009, 3) describe Ettinger's vocabulary as one of

'waiting and patient transformation, writing as spinning, threading, knotting, tressing, stringing, a language of slowness, of moulding, which affects our "seizure"'. Understanding that the language of the Matrix is intricately linked to the experience of the matrixial at work allows us to follow along the pathway of this intervention in psychoanalysis. Forced to slow down, pour over the words of critical texts, and read *with*, instead of treating texts as bodies on which the reader performs surgery through attempts to extract narrative meaning, becomes itself a de-phallicising practice.

Interrupting Phallic Logic

Ettinger's work on the relations between subjectivity, alterity and ethics – *not-one-ness, multiplicity, plurality, partiality, difference, strangeness* – is carefully constructed within a conceptual paradigm which attends to the historical positioning of subjectivities in the negative relation to the positivised term of the masculine, or as negative – in psychoanalysis, philosophy, aesthetics, and linguistic and literary theory.¹³ I want to return to the idea of her language as an *event* as this is a position from which we can conceive of how it initiates a different relation to words. We have the potential to shape different relationships towards language through change from within, destruction or damage to its signifiers, the discovery and exploration of its 'empty spaces'. For Ettinger (1992, 194), it is here that we 'might discover a language of margins, or a marginal language – is that not what poetry and art are about?', she asks. Ettingerian language, as event, is elaborated through the process of *metraorphosis*, the Matrix's mode of meaning-making. The Matrix is related to this process in which *I* and *non-I(s)* emerge in co-existence with, Ettinger (200) emphasises, 'neither symmetrical nor identical nor mirroring relationships'. In this formulation, *I* and *non-I(s)* 'neither swallow nor kill one another – symbolically or in reality – while transforming in one another's presence' (200). The borderlines between *I* and *non-I(s)* are 'surpassed and transformed to become thresholds' (201). Borderlines can be traditionally thought of as divisions but in metramorphosis they become thresholds, meaning that they become a possibility for occurrences that are not predictable. The borderline becomes a threshold for an event that will resonate for the partners in the event but in each partner *differently*. Ettinger (201) posits that it is in the surpassing and transformation of borderlines to become thresholds that 'a shift aside for the Phallus [occurs], offering an-other symbolic filter'. With this other symbolic filter, we now have another way to access meanings illegible to the phallic logic. As we can see, the Matrix, and its meaning-making apparatus, metramorphosis, introduce a new symbol to supplement Lacan's notion of the symbolic. By adding a symbol that conceptualises another sphere – borderlines and thresholds where transformations can occur – Ettinger continually shifts the phallic in language:

While the Phallus involves processes of metaphor and metonymy, the Matrix is related to processes of metramorphosis on the edge of metaphor and metonymy. Metramorphosis is the process of change in borderlines and thresholds between being and absence, memory and oblivion, *I* and *non-I*, a process of transgression and fading away. The metramorphic consciousness has no centre, cannot hold a fixed gaze – or, if it has a centre, it constantly slides to the borderline, to the margins. Its gaze escapes the margins and returns to the margins. Through this process the limits, borderlines, and thresholds conceived are continually transgressed or dissolved, thus allowing the creation of new ones. (1992, 203)

This is paradoxical for the binaristic logic of phallic thinking in which one sees clearly or not at all. In the Matrix, something is constantly being transgressed, new meanings and new understandings continually created. Gathering the threads of this complex theorisation, coupled with what I will name Cixous's gift economy of textuality in the feminine, it becomes possible to formulate a mode of reading that is neither dominating nor assimilating but one which we can borrow to think about the ways in which texts perform their own *poiesis* and one in which the feminine is centred. To elaborate this line of thinking, I will make some final conceptual moves necessitating a turn to the Ettingerian concept of subjectivity-as-encounter as well as the Cixousian gift-event.

By attending more holistically to the ways in which the Matrix aesthetically impresses us through what Ettinger defines as *sense-knowing*, rhythm, sound, touch, feeling, pressure, resonance – processes of metamorphosis – we can conceive of a language that moves beyond representation.¹⁴ Matrixial theory presents a model for transmitting and reworking *encounters* through artworking. In lending oneself to the work through encounter (as opposed to exchange – in the sense of obtaining or extracting something from the work with which to substantiate or validate one's position, for example) something must be transmitted, imbuing the reader/viewer with a sense of *response-ability* and a willingness, as *wit(h)ness*, to carry or to find a space with which to hold that which has been transmitted without falling into the trap of representation. To return to and expand on an earlier point, Ettinger's formulation of Matrix and metamorphosis highlights the Oedipal complex as the installation of metaphor and metonymy, that is, metaphor is associated with identification and fixation and metonymy with externalisation and endless sliding. Her interruption of phallic logic serves as a critical demonstration of how language can be used to create radical shifts within a body of philosophical and psychoanalytic discourse. Classic psychoanalysis would have us believe that we cannot get beyond the psycho-linguistic structuring of subjectivity. Ettinger's use of language in playful, subversive, political, anarchic ways *in the feminine* is, however, precisely what equips us with the conceptual tools to refigure our understanding of what it means to be a subject in the world. Matrix and metamorphosis contribute profoundly to thinking *with* and through the feminine in ways in which, as concepts, they enable us to glimpse meaning in the shifting and sliding of new signifiers without slipping into '*non-sense*' (Ettinger 2006b, 141). 'Sense', Ettinger (2010, 93) argues, 'does not dwell in the celibate subject but is created by different designs of rapport in co-emergence and by gradual changes in borderlinks'. In the primordial encounter, metamorphosis gives rise to processes in which not sharing, co-affecting, or transforming become impossibilities. Instead, these transgressions become involved in the creation of what Ettinger names partial-subjectivities which are neither split nor fused. In later life, 'evocations and irruptions of the feminine/prenatal encounters and emergences of matrixial cross-scribed imprints, are not psychotic' (2006b, 141). It is only when they have no symbolic access 'in a culture that takes them for non-sense' (2006b, 141) that they become psychosis-like.

We are not yet in the realm of subject and object and yet this theorisation is not without its foundations in the very things we have been taught through psychoanalysis, philosophy, linguistics and language. However, as has been touched upon, the mother is erased from the subjectivising process in classic psychoanalysis. Ettinger's (2011) formulation of the *transsubject* – as opposed to the intersubjective of Kleinian object relations – and *transject* (part subject, part object) gives us a way of figuring the inscription of traces

which are left on the proto-subject in the intra-uterine encounter before entering the world and which can surface in relations with Others later in life in *encounter-eventing*. There is never a moment in the matrixial in which we are a discreet subject meeting a discreet object. The *transjective* offers a moment in which we can loosen the necessary frontiers of territorialising the self to spatially and psychically position the self in relation to the world and other subjects. Tina Kinsella offers a useful analysis of the transjective stratum of subjectivity:

[it] continues to pulse alongside and beneath the phallic level of individual subjectivity as a 'shareable dimension of subjectivity'. Composed of objectal and subjective elements, the partialized subject is to be considered as transject, capable of transgressing past individual and psychical somatic boundaries to participate affectively with and share in a subjectivity that is larger than one's own. (2020, 42)

Texts, then, are also *transjects* in Ettinger's formulation as they too contain traces of the artist, their becoming, their – feminine – subjectivity. The transformative capacity of an encounter-event with the texts we as feminist scholars encounter is in the resurfacing of those non-psychotic cross-scribed imprints that bring us into an ethical relation with the other. The importance of the interruption of phallic logic to the Matrix and the creation of a supplementary language offer a meaningful and rigorous set of conceptual tools for reading *with* texts, that is, reading for the Matrixial dimensions already there that become legible once such possibilities are posited. That is to say, the creation of concepts perplexing to phallic Language undoes the structural binary difference that Saussure identified, Lacan took up and Derrida sought to reveal as unstable in deconstruction. Both Ettinger and Cixous question what happens when we are *in* language.

Gifting in the Feminine

In conversation with Cixous, Calle-Gruber (1997, 4) asserts, 'what is most true, for you, is poetic writing', to which Cixous responds, 'what is most true is poetic because it is not stopped-stoppable. [...] There is a continuity in the living; whereas theory entails a discontinuity, a cut, which is altogether the opposite of life'. Cixous's play with language is a play within and around the law which constitutes the *propre* to allow for the 'not stopped-stoppable' of the *non-propre*, that is, the *feminine* which is an excess that shifts from signifier to signifier in an endless chain. Cixous, too, creates a supplementary language in which concepts such as *étymologique* create the conditions for a feminine (gift) economy to be articulated, situating her discussion of sexual difference in relation to the problematic of the gift.¹⁵ Cixous's reclamation of the feminine and her elaboration of *becoming* in her writing destabilises the law of return to which the 'logic' of the gift is bound. For Cixous, masculinist notions of the gift are imbued with a sense of 'return' and 'revenue' and are thus implicated in a discourse that concerns itself with loss and accumulation, bound to an understanding of exchange in terms of commerce and logic in the law of return. In this formulation, the gift is thus always one-that-takes. It does not accommodate for the array of subjects situating themselves within the gift event. What is different in the feminine economy of the gift is found in the 'why and how of the gift, in the values that the gesture of giving affirms [and] causes to circulate' (Cixous 2001, 87). The feminine gift resides in textuality, in 'the veins and nerves of matter'

(87). The interconnectedness of a Cixousian feminine and the gift event is captured in a writing that resides at the very edges of the self and this itself is intricately tied to the notion of difference explored and elaborated in the texts considered in this article and in the reconsideration of bisexuality at work in Cixous's texts, by which, moments of creation, invention and giving are constituted. The feminine Cixous speaks of is one which *gives* to the other, to the other *l'*s unknown to the self and the Other subject. As with *jouissance* and as with other feminist formulations of *becoming*, the feminine that gives to the other to keep the other alive through an opening up of oneself, a coming out of oneself to go towards the other, is at risk of psychic danger. In Cixous's writing is an opening up of self to the potential psychic dangers of being *with* the other. However, this is not a sacrificial act – the feminine gift is one that 'gives *for*' without trying to 'recover expenses' – but a *gifting*, a desire to know deeply the matrix of subjectivities within each subject, or, the *l'*s unknown to the self, as well as a desire to know the other. Writing of a shared becoming, Cixous (1976, 893) says 'the new love dares for the other, wants the other, makes dizzying, precipitous flights [...] without the fear of ever reaching a limit; she thrills in our becoming. And we'll keep on becoming!' In other words, one identifies with the other in as much as one can without fusing with the other, one moves as close as possible to the other, allowing oneself to be altered by the other, without ever becoming the other.

Cixous's writing renders the text as gift, the potential of which is infused with compassion and love, an exchange between Self and Other in space and time. The radical possibility of a kind of feminine gift is generative of a gesture that is capable of moving beyond the law of return in which other economies of expenditure, thought, and appropriation are fixed. The giving that occurs in the act of translation, or, working through and being worked upon by Cixous's textuality, charts a different kind of economy which moves beyond a notion of the gift that is bound to this law of return. That is, the cultivation of giving is absent, in a sense, it is not something that is failure-oriented, as Conley emphasises in her discussion of a Cixousian gift economy:

The question of the gift in relation to affective economies that has been a constant throughout Cixous's writings; they all meditate on ways of loving. How does one love without killing the other? Love is linked to time and space. It is a question of listening to the other, of being attuned to the other. Contrary to passion, which burns all the steps and kills, the movement of love toward the other is full of moments of non-love. Cixous maintains her distinction from *Prénoms de personne*, between *consumer* (to burn) and *consommer* (to eat, to incorporate). In love, there may be moments of non-love as well as of passion, moments of consuming. But there cannot be *consummation*, which in any case is death. (1991, 127–128)

This kind of giving does not do violence to the Other. It does not yearn for the violent appropriation of the other to ensure the narcissistic consolidation of the Self. The idea of the Cixousian Gift is to love the Other without taking the Other hostage; to love the Other without extinguishing the difference of the Other in order to produce the fictive totality of the Self. For Cixous, it is only through close examination of the unanalysable in its complexity – sexual difference – that we can cease reinforcing phallogocentrism. Cixous's extremely careful textual, conceptual, material threading together through translation as a process of transferring, of carrying, I argue, is precisely what enables us as feminist thinkers and doers to place ourselves within a gift event. This, for me, is precisely what is inexhaustible in Cixous's writing of *voler*. Echoes of a Cixousian relation

between translation, carrying and gifting within the expanse of psychoanalysis, sexual difference, and the word are carefully elaborated in the writings of Ettinger.

Conclusion

This article brings into dialogue the writings of Cixous and Ettinger identifying key concepts and converging points of interest that, considered together, offers to feminist debate and criticism an Other axis of sexual difference accessible to all living subjects. I have returned to Cixous's early texts to elaborate how an excavation of the landscape of patriarchal discourse has created, in language, radical possibilities for thinking the feminine prior to the existence of an established theorisation of subjectivity. Cixous's generative textual concepts gift to us a way of navigating a path for thinking and reading the feminine. Concepts such as *étymologique* constitute a particular embodied writing that in turn constitutes a body of its own. Speaking of a new discourse, one which is *in-process* in the writing of 'The Laugh of the Medusa', Cixous declares:

Since these reflections are taking shape in an area just on the point of being discovered, they necessarily bear the mark of our time – a time during which the new breaks away from the old, and, more precisely, the (feminine) new from the old (*la nouvelle de l'ancien*). Thus, as there are no grounds for establishing a discourse, but rather an arid millennial ground to break, what I say has at least two sides and two aims: to break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project. (1976, 875)

The breaking away, breaking up, and destroying takes place in Cixous's writing of *voler*, the very textuality of which is unyielding in its capacity to radicalise and transform language and meaning-making. It is precisely because Cixous's writing unsettles the very questions that form the basis for her theory that I arrived at Ettinger's work. Ettinger's theoretical project is vast, and this article has presented a small aspect of her work to demonstrate how we can continue to work with material texts beyond the moment of aesthetic encounter. Through Ettinger's theorisation of the matrix, we arrive at something which has universal status in that it relates to *all born subjects*. In the bending, twisting, and even destruction of language elaborated in the theory of the matrix, we can conceive of a language that moves beyond the confines of representation. Ettinger's feminist interventions in psychoanalytical theory engender new paradigms in feminist debate and criticism that do not collapse into a relation between a sovereign subject and an Other that consolidates a sovereign subject, allowing instead for a simultaneous de-phallicising and de-disciplining feminist practice. What makes the writings of Cixous and Ettinger, when brought together in this way, particularly generative is their ability to slide under the phallocentricity of Language to approach an ethics of the Other. Bringing Cixous and Ettinger into dialogue brings to contemporary debates around the dismantling of gender binaries an *expanded symbolic* in which non-binary sexualities, trans studies and readings of the body are intricately connected to an Other/feminine sexual difference. A Cixousian reclamation of the feminine, coupled with Ettinger's theorisation of another sphere via the matrix offers foremost affective resources for hospitality and compassion. This meeting of works offers to feminist debate and criticism radical potentialities for reading *with*, that is a process in which we are not reading as I's positioned in opposition to an Other, not engaged in appropriative acts, rather, text and reader co-exist.

Notes

1. These converge specifically in the ways in which the writings of Jacques Lacan were initially taken up by feminist theorists. For example, see, Felman (1993), Jackson and Scott (1996), Lacan, Rose, and Mitchell (1985), Mitchell (2000), Rose (1986).
2. For a comprehensive discussion on the implications of the formulation of a feminine sexual difference on trans identity, see Cavanagh (2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2019a, 2019b),
3. *Jouissance* is a concept elaborated and developed by Lacan. See Lacan (1994, 1998a, 1998b, 2002).
4. Lacan's 'Rome Discourse' establishes the central place of language in psychoanalysis. In this seminar, Lacan draws on the work of Alexandre Kojève, Martin Heidegger and Claude Lévi-Strauss to emphasise the ontological dimension of language that is the basis for thought and that puts psychoanalysis in relation to language. Paul Verhaeghe (2014) offers an excellent reading of Lacan's reorientation of psychoanalysis by positioning it in relation to language.
5. Lacanian structuralism can be understood in terms of the relations between the phallus, power, and exchange. In summarising 'Sexual Relations' in the work of Lacan, Grosz (1990, 126) makes the argument that 'the phallus is the condition of symbolic exchange relations which Levi-Strauss (1963) saw as the condition of culture. The phallus is both the object circulated in ritually inscribed networks and of social exchange; and in the rules which govern the direction and flow of the object.'
6. Some critics contest Rubin's reading of the Oedipal Complex. For a comprehensive overview of this debate, arguments in which the phallus is on the side of feminism can be found in Zupancic (2008), Adams (1996), Copjec (2002), McNulty (2014), Gherovici (2018).
7. Ettinger (1992, 15–18) distinguishes her theoretical project from others that engage with the question of sexual difference including Julia Kristeva who theorises the pre-Oedipal Chora and Luce Irigaray who conceives of the sexed body as the basis of difference.
8. Lacan (1975, 13) speaks of woman as '*pas-toute*' translated into English as 'not-all'. Woman is a non-universal; she does not have recourse to the phallic exception afforded masculinity. Lacan later posits that woman is a symptom of woman, whose psychic economy she can only inhabit as a direct cause of their desire.
9. Ettinger (2003, 2006a) elaborates the significance of the matrixial for girls and women, however, I reiterate that her key point is that the matrixial is a resource for all subjects.
10. By no means an exhaustive list, some notable works which speak to debates around gender, performativity, fluidity, and the dissolution of the feminine/masculine binary include (Butler 1990, 1993; Sedgwick 2008; Lorde [1984] 2007; Anzaldúa 2009).
11. In my doctoral thesis *Experimental Writing & the Encounter-Event in Feminist Readings* (University of Leeds 2020) I elaborate the concept of *tongueliness* as a resource for a feminist practice of reading.
12. For a detailed discussion of queerness in Cixous's writing, see Bostow (2019), Bray (2003), Nautiyal (2016), Segarra (2019).
13. Ettinger rigorously traces the development of her thought by placing each theoretical move in direct conversation with preceding and existing works by thinkers including Lévinas, Lacan, Winnicott, Deleuze, Guattari, Irigaray, Kristeva, and more. Not only does she do this to differentiate her work from other theoretical propositions but also to account for the very real historical, socio-political, and ethical effects of a traumatisation of the feminine and a foreclosure of different modes of relationality.
14. One cannot speak of sense-knowing without referencing the work of Rita Felski, whose writing is profoundly important in its articulation of new relations between texts and their readers. Felski's writing, in particular, on aesthetic attachments, enable us to imagine a political ethics of reading. See, for example, Felski (2003, 2008, 2015, 2020).
15. Cf. Cixous (1991), Derrida (1972, 1994, 1998, 2001), Garnier (2019).

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