

## Textual Violence in Feminist Criticism: The Case of Hélène Cixous and Clarice Lispector

In the 1970's, French critic Hélène Cixous introduced her provocative and provocative and polemical notion of *écriture féminine*, through which she encouraged feminists and literary critics, in general, to consider the role of language and writing as sites for dismantling patriarchal structures of domination in the social, political and linguistic fields. Together with Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, among others, Cixous explored the possibilities of alternative discourses to patriarchal "logocentrism," which privilege linear logic and time, textual closure and univocal readings. Her intention was to search for *sorties* (the title of one of her essays in *La jeune née*) or as in the English translation indicates "Out and Out: Attacks/ Ways Out/ Forays" (1) out of patriarchal binary logic which erases differences and relegates the Other—principally "woman," but also non-Western cultures and persons—to positions of subordination. Her rather utopian notion of a feminine/female libidinal economy, expressed through a specific mode of writing, which rather than appropriating and therefore, silencing the Other would respect and celebrate the Other's differences, approaching, pleasuring in, yet never subsuming him/her/it has been deemed rather controversial. Certain critics such as Toril Moi declared *écriture féminine* to be problematic and essentialistic because they saw a danger in ascribing "feminine" traits such as silence, fluidity, humidity to writing (2); often, these traits were suspiciously reminiscent of the paralyzing tags affixed to women by patriarchal ideologies; and, promulgating a "feminine" writing would perhaps perpetuate these negative stereotypes.

My intention here is not to give an assessment of Cixous' ideas regarding "feminine writing," as her *écriture féminine*, as well as other French feminisms have been discussed at length elsewhere. However, her concern for inter-subjective relations—of

approaching an Other without appropriating his/her differences—is a valuable impulse that still needs to be considered and applied in today’s cultural and critical practices. It is in this spirit that I will consider some of Cixous’ writings as well as the writings of some of her critical adherents on the Brazilian writer, Clarice Lispector, whose work she uses to illustrate *écriture féminine*. Using a post-structuralist focus which identifies, questions, and attempts to undermine cultural and ideological hegemonies, I will identify some of Lispector's literary and cultural contexts, and in so doing, point to the pitfalls and implications of Cixous' readings of her work. As I hope to show, Cixous unwittingly performs textual violences with regard to Lispector’s writing. What Cixous writes about what feminine writing should do, and what her own writing actually does *vis à vis* Lispector’s work is often at odds with, and contradictory to her agenda. Yet, her intention—the call to “approach the Other” with respect to his/her differences—remains a valid focus for critics in general, and her textual successes as well as failures can serve as caveat to other feminists engaged in literary and cultural studies.

Hélène Cixous gives an account of her "discovery" of Clarice Lispector in the bilingual edition of *Vivre l'orange* (1979) which together with "*L'approche de Clarice Lispector*" mark the first instances in which she expounds and disseminates her ideas on *écriture féminine*, using Lispector as an example of the ideal practitioner of this "feminine writing." There, she writes, *Une voix de femme est venue à moi de très loin, comme une voix de ville natale* [A woman’s voice came to me from far away, like a voice from a birth town] <sup>1</sup> The joy Cixous feels in having come into contact with Lispector's "voice" stems from a sense of relief in finally having found another woman to take up her rather waning cause. Carol Armbruster reminds us that "after a prolific ten years of theorizing and poeticizing an *écriture féminine*, (Cixous) came to a point where she felt uninspired, spent in her individual capacity to go beyond the work she had already done and concerned about the realization of political goals that were the result from *écriture féminine* " (145). Cixous, herself, asserts, "*une écriture m'a trouvée quand*

j'étais introuvable à moi-même" [a writing found me when I was unfindable to myself ] (*Vivre* 12-13). Her "discovery" of Lispector came at an opportune moment when Cixous could use Lispector's writings to her own ends. As Armbruster attests, "since this discovery, Lispector has been the major inspiration and something of a guiding light for Cixous's work, entering her texts in many guises, including Cixous's well known word games" (145).

The above-mentioned two texts by Cixous gave the author's writings and ideas renewed vigor, sparking in her followers a sudden interest in the Brazilian author. These, in turn, eagerly began to write on Lispector, attempting to explicate her texts in order to reveal their affinities with Cixous' own writings. Needless to say, because these critics were unfamiliar with Lispector's corpus outside of the texts analyzed by Cixous, their readings were myopic, often patronizing, and inaccurate. The "voice" that Cixous heard from afar (*Vivre l'orange*) was never Lispector's own-- hers was silenced from the start.

Claudine Fisher, for example declares, reductively that "a few words from *La passion selon G.H. (A paixão segundo G.H.)* could be chosen at random, and the vision would definitely reveal itself as Cixousian" (25). Jean Larose rather condescendingly views Cixous' endeavor in *Vivre l'orange* as her attempt to "save" Lispector's writing from oblivion:

Pour sauver de l'oubli l'écriture de Clarice Lispector, elle a d'abord lancé dans le désert *Vivre l'orange*, avec un courage moderne (87).

[In order to save Clarice Lispector's writing from oblivion, first she thrust *Vivre l'orange* into the desert with a modern courage] <sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most disturbing assessment of Lispector's writings by a critic sympathetic to Cixous' views is the one that Carol Armbruster provides, which speaks for itself:

American readers have recently started to look critically at what proponents of *écriture féminine* have to say about theory, women's writing, and women's

causes—social, political and economic. Cixous's texts and statements are receiving greater and greater dissemination here. Given her current enthusiasm for Lispector, we should look at Lispector's texts—first in order to understand Cixous's enthusiasm for them; second, to see an example of the *écriture féminine* that Cixous called for in the "Rire de la Méduse." We might also see in Lispector's texts, especially the ones discussed here, an indication of the further development of Cixous's own texts.

Lispector will be a welcome find (*sic*) to American audiences and we can only hope that more of her texts will soon be made available in English (155).

What the quotes above delineate is a kind of “institutionalization” of H  l  ne Cixous and her work which borders on exploiting, or “colonizing” Clarice Lispector and her works. One could, simply dismiss the above as irresponsible scholarship especially given the fact that Clarice Lispector’s work has received widespread international critical attention, particularly now that her texts are readily available in French and English translations, among others. Her work stands on its own, and the “Cixousian faction” has become a minority and cannot seriously undermine Lispector’s oeuvre. However, for the purposes of this paper, what merits attention is the relationship of power that is created and perpetuated when a now-canonized French feminist writer, H  l  ne Cixous, disseminates her ideas, using another woman’s texts to bolster her own. Critics of literatures not belonging to the US-European (i.e. “central”) literary canons necessarily have to content with the latest “fashionable” metropolitan theories and carefully scrutinize their validity or applicability to the literatures of their particular focus.

The Cixous-Lispector problematic, outlined here, evokes a paradoxical reality that faces the feminist academy: how to grapple with the fact that in the institutionalization of what one may term a “dominant,” Anglo-American and European feminist thought, it becomes implicated in the patriarchal, hegemonic power relations it

purports to condemn in its relationship(s) to other, i.e. marginal, literatures? As Debra Castillo notes:

Strikingly, in this era of gender and race consciousness, the first world continues to subject the third to analyses that relegate its cultural production to that group of activities traditionally associated with the implicitly inferior feminine realm. (3)

As was hinted earlier, the US-European canon generally constitutes the literary and theoretical norm, and the traditions outside of it—such as the Latin American literary tradition—remain in the periphery, “exotic,” always “Othered.” It is interesting to note that Castillo uses the term “feminine” to describe the critical realm to which third world—i.e. Latin American—writers are subjected by certain first world critics, without specifically referring to Cixous’ treatment of Lispector’s texts. While Cixous has been criticized for assigning feminine traits such as silence, fluidity, humidity to her notion of *écriture féminine*, traits which suspiciously evoke patriarchal stereotypes—the term “feminine” acquires yet another negative dimension when used to describe the writing by a woman from Brazil, a writer at least twice marginalized on account of her sex and of her culture.

It is worth mentioning that most of the texts treated by Cixous in her expositions of *écriture féminine* prior to her “discovery” of Lispector are authored by canonized, Western *male* writers: Joyce, Hoffman, Kleist, Genet, Freud and Poe, among others.<sup>3</sup> There is something provocative and subversive in Cixous’ intimation that the writings of Joyce or Genet, for example, are illustrative of *écriture féminine*, precisely because these authors are not biologically female but rather, canonized male writers. The subversive potential inherent in the term “feminine writing” is perhaps best appreciated when applied to the writings of canonized *male* authors. One is always at liberty to agree or disagree with Cixous’ readings of the above-mentioned authors precisely because they belong to a reified tradition that sustains them. However, something slippery and

potentially dangerous occurs when the term is applied to a non-canonized (in the US and European traditions), Brazilian woman writer.

In her discussion of Hélène Cixous' work, Morag Shiach notes that in 1978, Cixous wrote about living in an "over-published solitude," cut off from other women writers:

Her theorization of 'feminine' writing had taken place almost entirely in terms of the texts of canonical male writers, such as Joyce, Kleist or Hoffman. Her theoretical vocabulary had been derived from Freud and Derrida. Suddenly she discovered a writer who was largely unknown in France, who was Jewish, who was a woman, and who seemed to share many of her own philosophical and stylistic preoccupations. The opportunities of a highly personal, and very committed, engagement with this writer seemed immense. (66)

Cixous believed she had found a kindred spirit in Clarice Lispector, one who would be able to help her cause. Although Cixous underscores that her use of the term "feminine" in no way implies a biological determinism—that it transcends the signified, "woman,"—in her treatment of Clarice Lispector's writing, the term recuperates some of its original, traditional signification. The "opportunities for a highly personal, and very committed engagement with this writer seemed immense" precisely because this writer was a *woman*, and Jewish, like Cixous. Lispector, then, could help Cixous feel reconnected to other women writers, and because "she was largely unknown in France" her oeuvre would require explication and mediation. Lispector's texts and contexts had no voices of their own. In other words, the opportunities for an engagement with Lispector are contingent upon Lispector's biological "femininity" and her cultural "feminization"; that is, the subordination of her cultural referents by Cixou's own hegemonic readings.

Verena Andermatt Conley attempts to justify Cixous' contextual omissions by when she declares the following:

Cixous's literary 'history' consists of what she calls contemporary, rather than synchronic or diachronic texts. In other words, she chooses different texts that have certain affinities and that fit into a program with her own readings; she studies their various ways of dealing with similar issues through a prism that, by way of multiple comparisons, breaks writing into 'colors' or 'tones' of composition. Although the cultural referents are not obliterated, her readings clearly do not dwell primarily on literary history and may risk not appealing to those studying a work as it reflects specifically a given culture. Instead, Cixous chooses to discuss questions of the highest possible logical category, that is, of life and art or life and death ("Introduction," x).

Cixous' tendency to favor lofty questions "of the highest possible category," and to disregard historical contexts is precisely the ruse that traps her into engaging in a textual violence that exploits her gaps in knowledge of Lispector's work.

I will argue and attempt to demonstrate through a reading of Cixous' language in *Vivre l'orange* and "L'approche de Clarice Lispector" that *écriture féminine* falters in the praxis of Cixous' own writing on Clarice Lispector. The specific texts reproduce the same appropriative, patriarchal economy that Cixous denounces "in theory." But the space created by the coordinates of this Cixous-Lispector textual relationship identified and analyzed here also invites a re-reading of Clarice Lispector's work with a keener critical eye that searches for the ways in which the Brazilian writer herself addresses the dynamic between self and Other. A close reading of her well-known novel *A paixão Segundo G.H.* may point to alternative ways to inter-subjective approaches of "Others."

Cixous' "discovery" of Lispector is momentous because as Morach Chiach writes:

having established the political importance of feminine writing for women, Cixous has eventually found a woman practicing such writing, with an understanding of its implications. Having theorized the limitations and dangers of

dualist thought, of subjectivity based on the obliteration of the Other, Cixous suddenly discovers another woman writer exploring the same issues in fictional form. The impact of this discovery is expressed in intellectual, individual and political terms. (*Hélène* 59)

The encounter with Lispector's texts marks a clear shift for Cixous, for now Cixous's theorizing of an *écriture féminine* gains an application and praxis in the writing of Clarice Lispector. If Cixous' adherents apply the terms of *écriture féminine* to Lispector's writing, it is because their model does so as well.

While *Vivre l'orange* is more of an "autobiographical fiction" than a theoretical piece, one can begin to discern the critical strategy that Cixous uses in her subsequent treatments of Lispector's texts, particularly in "L'approche de Clarice Lispector." Shiach provides a point of departure for analyzing *Vivre l'orange*:

She [Cixous] is not talking about the real Clarice Lispector, a Brazilian left-wing modernist writer who died in 1977, but rather exploring the power of 'Lispector' as a symbol, and seeing the sort of connections Lispector's writing allows her to make. Cixous had found 'women' as a political problem, and 'feminine writing' as a political solution. In Lispector she tries to construct the unity of these two terms. ("Their symbolic," 161)

The key in Shiach's observation is that Cixous is not really interested in the "real" Lispector; rather, in the functionality that Lispector the writer of *écriture féminine* affords her. Marta Peixoto makes the following incisive observation regarding Cixous' dynamic toward Lispector: "While on the surface Cixous offers Lispector praise, warmth, and a generous receptivity—a nurturing text modeled after the very pattern she ascribes to Lispector—she also silences Lispector by muting and replacing her words." (43) Cixous attempts to "dialogue" with Lispector, using the tropes of *synecdoche* and *apostrophe*. She hears Lispector's "voice," speaks to it, and the "voice" answers:

Une voix de femme est venue à moi de très loin, comme une voix de ville natale, elle m'a apporté des savoirs que j'avais autrefois, des savoirs intimes, naïfs, et savants, anciens et frais [...] cette voix ne me cherchait pas, elle écrivait à personne, à toutes, à l'écriture, dans une langue étrangère, je ne la parle pas, mais mon coeur la comprend, et ses paroles silencieuses dans toutes les veines de ma vie se sont traduites en sang fou, en sang joie.

[A woman's voice came to me from far away, like a voice from a birth-town, it brought me insights that I once had, intimate insights, naïve and knowing, ancient and fresh (...) this voice was not searching for me, it was writing to no one, to all women, to writing, in a foreign tongue, I do not speak it, but my heart understands it, and its silent words in all the veins of my life have translated themselves into mad blood, into joy-blood] (10/11)

Lispector's "voice" functions as trope—literally, a "turning away" from the "real," material Lispector to a disembodied metaphysical presence which "speaks." It is important to note the biblical resonances in this passage: the "voice" is heard in the desert, speaking a foreign tongue whose "silent words" are nevertheless understood intuitively. They bring intimate, ancient and fresh insights. The "voice" becomes the voice of god; when it speaks it provides the answers:

J'ai demandé: "*Qu'ai-je de commun avec les femmes?*" Du Brésil une voix est venue me rendre l'orange perdue. "*le besoin d'aller aux sources. La facilité d'oublier la source. La possibilité d'être sauvée par une voix humide qui est allée aux sources. Le besoin d'entrer plus avant dans la voix natale.*"

[I asked: "*What do I have in common with women?*". From Brazil a voice came to return the lost orange to me. "*The need to go to the sources. The easiness of forgetting the source. The possibility of being saved by a humid voice that has gone to the sources. The need to go further into the birth-voice.*] (16/17)

In this instance, the use of apostrophe or the direct address of “an absent, dead or inanimate being by a first person speaker” (Johnson 185) functions as a “form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness”(Johnson 185). “Lispector,” or rather, the more intimate, “Clarice” which Cixous uses more frequently, becomes a vessel, void of any meaning *per se*, except in terms of the function it provides. The ruse in the act of addressing the voice as “Clarice” is that it creates a tone of familiarity and an intimacy that would seem to give Cixous the authority to write about the Brazilian author’s work and to “speak” on their behalf. A closer reading reveals that “Clarice” becomes an empty signifier, at the disposal of Cixous’ word games and neologisms; it ultimately functions as a guarantee of Cixous’ own voice—as a stand-in for Cixous herself:

*Lire femme? Écoutez: Clarice Lispector. Clarice arrive premièrement comme ceci; en nous sautant dessus, au-devant de nous, flèche, vit vole, panthère et se pose. La couleur de son nom en mouvement est évidemment lispectorange: une orange légèrement pourprée peau de clémentine. Mais si l'on prend son nom dans les mains délicates et si on le déplie et le dépluche en suivant attentivement les indications des gousses, selon sa nature intime, il y a là des dizaines de petits cristaux efflorescents, que se réfléchissent ensemble dans toutes les langues où passent les femmes. Claricelispector. Clar. Ricelis. Celis. Lisp. Clasp. Clarisp. – Clar—Spec—Tor—Lis—Icelis—Isp—Larice—Ricepector—clarispector—claror—listor—rire—clarire—respect—rispect—clarispect—ice—Clarici—O Clarice tu es toi-même les voix de la lumière, l'iris, le regard, l'éclair, l'éclaris orange autour de notre fenêtre. (113)*

*[To read woman? Listen: Clarice Lispector. Clarice arrives first like this: jumping over us, in front of us, arrow, flies, panther and settles down. The color of her name in movement is obviously lispectorange: a lightly purpled*

*clementine-skin orange, But if one takes her name in delicate hands and if one unfolds and....., there are there dozens of small efflorescent crystals that reflect together in all the languages where women pass. . Claricelispector. Clar. Ricelis. Celis. Lisp. Clasp. Clarisp. –Clar—Spec—Tor—Lis—Icelis—Isp—Larice—Ricepector—clarispector—claror—listor—rire—clarire—respect—rispect—clarispect—ice—Clarici—Oh Clarice you are yourself the voice of light, the iris, the look, the... le regard, l'éclair, l'éclaris orange autour de notre fenêtre.<sup>4</sup>*

That Cixous can address “Clarice” and make her respond is contingent upon taking the author and her cultural context as empty or “dead.” Cixous, who advocates “writing the body”: “Il faut que la femme s’écrive: que la femme écrive de la femme et fasse venire les femmes à l’écriture, don’t elles ont été éloignées aussi violemment qu’elles l’ont été de leurs corps (“Rire”39)—performs a textual dismemberment of “Clarice” through the use of apostrophe and synecdoche, and severs the “Other,” material Clarice Lispector from her own textual and contextual corpus. Peixoto summarizes the problem of Cixous’ readings of Lispector succinctly when she states that the closed, intuitive dialogue between kindred souls,

in fact represses the appropriate nature of the critical act, performed by necessity on an unconsenting patient, the writer’s text. Cixous’s attempt to counter that appropriation by imagining in its place a “dialogue” with the (dead) author only increases it, I think, by implying a privileged position for her own critical discourse: Lispector accompanies and authorizes my readings, she reads me as much as I read her. (42)

Hélène Cixous’ critical piece on Clarice Lispector titled, “L’approche de Clarice Lispector: Se laisser lire (par) Clarice Lispector, A Paixao [sic] Segundo C.L.” purports to explicate *A paixão segundo G.H.* in order to learn to “approach” the Other as

Lispector's character, G.H., does in the text. "Clarice" once again is presented as a mediator, as a teacher:

*Clarice Lispector*: Cette femme, notre contemporaine, brésilienne (née en Ukraine, d'origine juive), nous donne, non pas des livres, mais le vivre sauvé des livres, des récits, des constructions refoolantes. Et nous entrons, par son écriture-fenêtre, dans la terrible beauté d'apprendre à lire: en allant, à travers corps, de l'autre côté du moi. Aimer le vrai du vivant, ce qui semble *ingrat* aux yeux narcisses, le sang-prestige, le sans-actualité, aimer l'origine, s'intéresser personnellement à l'impersonnel, à l'animal, à la chose. (115)

À l'école de Clarice Lispector, nous apprenons l'approche. Nous prenons les leçons des choses. Les leçons d'appeler, de se laisser appeler. Les leçons de laisser venir, de recevoir. Les deux grandes leçons de vivre: *la lenteur et laideur*. (117).

[*Clarice Lispector*: This woman, our contemporary, Brazilian (born in the Ukraine, of Jewish origin), gives us not books but living saved from books, from narratives, repressive constructions. And through her writing-window we enter the awesome beauty of learning to read: going, by way of the body, to the other side of the self. Loving the true of the living, what seems *ungrateful* to narcissus eyes, the nonprestigious, the nonimmediate, loving the origin, interesting oneself personally with the impersonal, with the animal, with the thing.<sup>5</sup>

At the school of Clarice Lispector, we learn the approach. We take lessons of things. The lessons of calling, letting ourselves be called. The lessons of letting come, receiving. The two great lessons of living: *slowness and ugliness*. (60-1)]

Cixous' claims that Lispector is a teacher merits consideration, for, when read differently from Cixous' own angle, *A paixão segundo G.H.* offers some valuable lessons indeed.

*A paixão segundo G.H.* (1964), Lispector's fifth novel, has a rather sparse plot, as it is primarily an introspective monologue given by the principal character, G.H.. G.H., a single, urban, upper-class woman who spends her leisure time sculpting, decides one day to clean her penthouse, particularly the maid's quarters which she assumes to be in disarray, as she had just dismissed the maid, Janair, a few days before. Upon entering the room, G.H. is disconcerted to find, not filth and disorder, but a disturbing order and cleanliness which radiate brilliance. G.H. wavers between confusion, anger, and finally, nausea for she sees in the room's cleanliness and in the mysterious charcoal drawings on the wall of a man, woman and dog—probably left by Janair—a mocking of and an overt affront to her sense of being as she had previously experienced it:

O quarto divergia tanto do resto do apartamento que para entrar nele era como se eu ante tivesse saído de minha casa e batido a porta. O quarto era o oposto deo que eu criara em minha casa, o oposto de suave beleza que resultara de meu talento de arrumar, de meu talento de viver, o oposto de minha ironia serena, de minha doce e isenta ironia: era uma violentação das minhas aspas, das aspas que faziam de mim uma citação de mim. O quarto era o retrato de um estômago vazio. (29)

[The room was so different from the rest of the apartment that going into it was like leaving my own home and entering another. The room was the opposite of what I had created in my home, the opposite of the gentle beauty that came from my talent for arrangement, from my talent for living, the opposite of my serene irony, my sweet, disinterested irony: it was a violation of my quotation marks, the quotation marks that made me a reference to myself. The room was a portrait of an empty stomach.])<sup>6</sup>

This confrontation sparks in G.H. an almost mystical contemplation about her own life—its “quotation marks”—its artificiality, the presence of God and the possibility of human

transcendence. This experience is the catalyst that prompts her to write her “passion,” in all its connotations, existential and biblical, the following day.

The crux of her passion centers around a climactic incident which both marks and represents G.H.’s inner transformations: the encounter with a cockroach in the door of a wardrobe which she proceeds to crush. However, she does not kill it—and G.H. is convinced that the cockroach continues to stare at her as it lies wounded, and oozing a whitish substance. The protagonist is fascinated by what she perceives as the cockroach’s determination to survive in its pain and ugliness; she describes in great detail her contemplation of the cockroach as she sat on the former maid’s bed. In a kind of sacred moment, and G.H.’s most courageous and most authentic gesture, she decides to consume some of the white material seeping out of the creature, as though it were a kind of eucharist. The remainder of the novel consists of her trying to understand this act, the impulses that led to it, and its implications.

Interestingly, in “L’approche” and elsewhere, Cixous’s reading of the Lispector’s text centers on the premise that the key to G.H.’s “passion” or ordeal lies in the moment when the latter expresses remorse for having eaten of the cockroach:

Le trait merveilleux de cette histoire: aussitôt elle comprend, en passant par le portail de l’erreur, qu’elle s’est trompée: l’erreur c’est qu’elle n’a pas laissé la place à l’autre, et que, dans la démesure de l’amour, elle s’est dit: je vais dominer mon dégoût. Et je vais aller jusqu’au geste de la communion suprême. Je vais embrasser le lépreux. Mas le baiser au lépreux transformé en métaphore perd sa vérité.[...] Le plus difficile à faire, nous enseigne le texte, c’est d’arriver jusqu’à la plus extrême proximité en se gardant du piège de la projection, de l’identification. Il faut que l’autre reste étrangissime dans la plus grande proximité (“L’auteur” 157)

[And the marvelous thing about this story: she immediately realizes, passing through the portal of error, that she was mistaken. Her mistake was that she did

not give up the space to the other, and that, in the immoderation of love, she told herself, “I am going to overcome my disgust, and I am going to go as far as the gesture of supreme communion. I am going to kiss the leper.” But the kiss of the leper transformed into metaphor lost its truth (...) The text teaches us that the most difficult thing to do is to arrive at the most extreme proximity while guarding against the trap of projection, of identification. The other must remain absolutely strange within the greatest possible proximity. [170-1]

That is, according to Cixous, the greatest lesson the text proffers is the lesson of approaching an Other devoid of one’s self—of any projections—so as not to disturb, infringe upon or consume that Other. This is a valuable lesson indeed.

Cixous’ reading, however, indicates a blind-spot that is most significant *vis à vis* her own treatment of Lispector’s texts. Shiach notes that the strength of *A paixão segundo G.H.*, according to Cixous, “lies in the ways in which Lispector manages to push aside such elements of character, to remove the local and the accidental. Confronted by a cockroach, an insect she has always loathed, G.H. is initially paralyzed by neurotic dread...G.H. is driven to confront quintessential otherness, a form of being that cannot be referred to her own subjectivity, or controlled by it.” (*Hélène* 61). It is difficult to argue that “Lispector removes the local and the accidental” when one considers the setting of *A paixão segundo G.H.*. Cixous has neglected to see the Other woman in the text; she has forgotten the maid, Janair.

It is no accident that G.H.’s confrontation with the cockroach occurs in the maid’s quarters. The transformations that G.H. undergoes has much to do with her expectations and stereotypes of what the maid, who is undoubtedly poor and perhaps mulatto, and what the maid’s room should be like (i.e. messy, filthy, etc.). G.H. has led an artificial life; she has been defined and contained by the quotation marks of her class and social standing:

O apartamento me reflete. É no último andar, o que é considerado uma elegância. Pessoas de meu ambiente procuram morar na chamada “cobertura”. É bem mais que uma elegância. É um verdadeiro prazer: de lá domina-se uma cidade.

Quando essa elegância se vulgarizar, eu, se sequer saber por que, me mudarei para outra elegância? Tal vez. Como eu, o apartamento tem penumbras e luzes úmidas, nada aqui é brusco: um aposento precede e promete o outro. (21)

[The apartment reflects me. It's on the top floor, which is considered elegant. People in my circle try to live in the so-called penthouse. It's more than elegant. It's a real pleasure: you can command a city from up here. When that elegance becomes common, will I, without even thinking why, move to another kind of elegance? Maybe. Just like me, the apartment has moist lights and shadows, nothing here is sharp: one room precedes and anticipates the next. [22]

The confrontation with Janair's room and the cockroach in it, all of which functions as a kind of metonymy for Janair, is indeed cause for an earth-shaking transformation: G.H. is forced to face the “shadows” of her apartment and of herself. She experiences a process in which her “elegance” becomes vulgarized. As Ribeiro de Oliveira notes, G.H.'s existential anguish originates in her realization that she has been living life inauthentically and that she has seriously to question the class and racial assumptions that have shaped her entire life in order to begin to know herself genuinely:

No romance, a escultora tem de atravessar o caminho entre os dois mundos. Isso é parte do processo de sua “paixão”. À medida que o romance se desenrola, ela gradativamente muda do ódio para a aceitação da empregada. Num processo paralelo, chega a enfrentar e aceitar todos os seres humanos, até que finalmente tateia à procura do próprio eu e da realidade última. Nesse ponto a questão social já se tornou uma metáfora para o problema mais vasto da angústia existencial. (62-3)

[In the novel, the sculptor must cross the path between two worlds (the upper and lower classes). That is part of the process of her “passion.” As the novel unfolds, she gradually moves from hatred towards acceptance of the maid. In a parallel process, she comes to face and accept all human beings, until she finally engages the search for her own self and the ultimate reality. At that point the social question becomes a metaphor for the larger problem of existential anguish.]

G.H.’s moment of epiphany is not so much her realization that she has consumed another being, the cockroach (as Cixous would argue), but that she has committed too saintly an act; her arrogance has blinded her to the human realm, represented by Janair, and made her focus on something more elevated, more “transcendental”—the cockroach. She comes to realize that “a lei é que eu viva com a material de uma pessoa e não de uma barata.” This is one of the great lessons in *A paixão segundo G.H.*

Yet, Cixous continues to focus on the cockroach: “La Passion selon G.H.: la passion d’être dans l’appartenance impersonnelle vivante avec la grosse blatte brésilienne immémoriale, notre ancêtre: Barata.” (“L’approche” 137). It is not surprising that she disregards the importance of Janair, the maid, for in her expositions of *écriture féminine* she overlooks the intersecting sites of oppression that women experience that go beyond sexual oppression and include discrimination based on race and class. *Écriture féminine* seems speciously to be dictated by an unexamined, ever-respectful, non-violent, “feminine” desire for the Other which does not seek to appropriate or obliterate, which would be characteristic of the patriarchal, “phallogentric” order.

If Lispector’s text offers a lesson, it is that women cannot join in solidarity, speak on one another’s behalf simply because they are women; some may be oppressors and some may be oppressed, and often, they are unaware of the injustice and power inequality of which they partake, as is G.H.. In light of the Lispector-Cixous textual

polemic outlined here, one could read *A paixão segundo G.H.* as an allegory of Cixous' parasitic appropriations of Lispector's texts. Cixous commits the same error she remarks in G.H.: she consumes and appropriates the Other (the woman), but unlike G.H. she does not realize her error.

### **Another Approach: Clarice Lispector and Alterity**

That Clarice Lispector's fiction has a unique take on inter-subjective relations is undisputable. Cixous was certainly astute to perceive the Brazilian author's sensitivity towards existential questions, particularly the Self's relationship to Others. When Cixous first "discovered" Lispector, and before she began to share her "revelations" of and by "Clarice" to French and later, to North American readerships, the Brazilian writer for nearly three decades had been recognized as one of her country's most talented writers, both at home and abroad. As Earl Fitz notes:

At the time of her death in 1977, Clarice Lispector was one of the most respected writers not only in Brazil but in Spanish America as well. Although she was never a 'popular' author, in the sense that great numbers of people read her books, discerning readers throughout Latin America had praised her work for its brilliant use of language, its structural inventiveness, and its depiction of the alienated and frustrated modern human condition. (Preface)

Her richly diverse corpus includes novels, short stories, children's fiction, journalistic pieces, all of which are imbued with a lyricism and textual complexity that resist rigid thematic or generic categorizations. Because her texts ostensibly primarily address "universalist" themes about life, love, and death (Fitz 20), certain critics have accused Lispector of being aloof to social and political issues. Perhaps, it is this preoccupation

with existential concerns that has made Lispector most appealing to those engaged in promulgating a-historical, universalizing enterprises—such as Cixous with regard to *écriture féminine*.

However, the existentialist aspect of her writing is not the definitive marker of Lispector's work. Other critics such as Debra Castillo and Nelson Vieira have identified other perspectives from which to approach her writing. As Castillo notes after quoting Griselda Gámbaro who writes, “as far as I'm concerned, a work is feminist insofar as it attempts to explain the mechanics of cruelty, oppression, and violence through a story that is developed in a world in which men and women exist”:

In this respect, too, Lispector can be considered a political activist, for her stories of the stifling entrapment of her countrywomen in the restrictions of their role as wives and mothers are pointed reminders that women do indeed exist. (189)

In a different, though complementary vein, Vieira urges readers of Lispector to consider her Jewish heritage as another optic to explore her preoccupation with “difference,” “alterity,” and human relationships. Vieira writes, “Understanding Lispector's relationship with Judaic exegetic thinking and writing helps us grasp the paradox and mysticism in her work, which derive their power from the prophetic interpretative imperative that is the basis of rabbinic literature and commentary.” (150). As immigrant Jewish women in “foreign” lands, both Cixous and Lispector share common experiences which if examined separately from *écriture féminine* undoubtedly would have yielded a more grounded, more relevant, and more incisive feminist theory. Clarice Lispector's preoccupation with inter-relationships and the Other, particularly from the perspectives of women, her keen sense of the complexities of power relations in human interactions,

and her conscious awareness of the indeterminacy of language make her work especially rich and challenging.

**Conclusion:**

Debra Castillo, cautions critics and readers alike not to be persuaded by metropolitan feminist theories without a careful examination. Following the latest critical “flavor-of-the-month” leads to potential pitfalls:

It is important for the Latin Americanist to resist the categorical work of reason that follows from the special *a priori* assumptions deriving from insufficiently considered appropriations of metropolitan theories of feminism carried over into analyses of Latin American literature. It is absolutely essential for the critic to take into account both the vast differences in the field of production and the distinctive qualities of the object of study that may very well, if ignored, lead to either blindness to or erroneous evaluation of cultural products. (3-4)

Although Cixous’s *écriture féminine* may have lost some of the allure and importance of its day, the textual relationship created between Cixous and Lispector continues to offer insights into the present and future of feminist criticism. Our hope has been to instill a sense of academic responsibility not only in the Latin Americanist critic, but particularly in critics primarily treating US and European literatures who have a cursory knowledge or no knowledge of other, less central literatures. Literary critics are inevitably bound to the academic institutions through the circulation of their critical ideas and writings. Therefore, it is imperative to be aware of potential textual violences committed on the writings of “Others”—women and minorities—in the name of supporting abstract intellectual theories.

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College of Staten Island, CUNY

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> All translations of “*Vivre l’orange*” are provided in the bilingual edition of the text used here: “Vivre l’orange.” *L’heure de Clarice Lispector*. Paris: Des Femmes, 1989, pp. 10-11. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

<sup>2</sup> My translation.

<sup>3</sup> These writers are discussed at length in *The Exile of James Joyce, Prénoms de personne and Entre l’écriture* by Hélène Cixous.

<sup>4</sup> My translation. Interestingly, this playful word play is not translated in the bilingual edition of “Vivre l’orange.”

<sup>5</sup> Translated in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, by Hélène Cixous, p. 59. Edited by Deborah Jenson. Translated by Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson, Ann Liddle, Susan Sellers. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Taken from the English edition of the text: ---. *The Passion According to G.H.* Translated by Ronald W. Sousa. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p.34. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

<sup>7</sup> My translation.