In “Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l’Écriture féminine” (1985), Ann Rosalind Jones points out several problematic aspects of French feminists’ theory of women’s writing. In her understanding of French feminism, especially Cixous’s and Irigaray’s theories, Jones seems to experience a difficulty in regarding the female body as a direct source of female writing. From the psychosocial and anti-essentialist point of view, Jones criticizes French feminists’ employment of psychoanalysis and their seeming tendency towards essentialism. To Jones, psychoanalysis is not sufficient for explaining woman’s social oppression. Rather, in order to set woman free from the patriarchal oppression under which woman has been suffering, Jones suggests, feminists should first examine how woman’s social experience is constructed to be adequate to the patriarchal notion of femininity. According to Jones, feminists can change the social system which has been suppressing woman only when they understand the nature of woman’s social oppression. To Jones, French feminist psychoanalysis, although it is a powerful concept on account of its search for female subjectivity, does not give any adequate investigation of woman’s social experience, and moreover, it seems to overlook the fact that woman is a social being.

Jones’s Four Major Objections to French Feminism

Jones makes four major objections to the theory of écriture féminine. She starts her counter argument against French feminism with the basic
Can the body be a source of self-knowledge? Does female sexuality exist prior to or in spite of social experience? Do women in fact experience their bodies purely or essentially, outside the damaging acculturation so sharply analyzed by women in France and elsewhere? The answer is no, even in terms of the psychoanalytic theory on which many elements in the concept of féminité depend. (367)

Obviously Jones attacks French feminists' essentialisms and their method of psychoanalysis in this passage. For Jones, "sexuality is not an innate quality in women or in men" (367). In short, she considers that the source of women's oppression in patriarchal society is not their sexual difference but their gender difference from men. She emphasizes the necessity of psychosocial theory in order to solve the gender problems from which women have suffered. Psychoanalytic theory which investigates female sexuality prior to gender is not adequate for changing the social system, because it overlooks important psychosocial realities.

Jones' second objection is to French feminists' participation in a male-centered binary logic. According to Jones, French feminists' attempt to differentiate femininity from masculinity still imprisons them in Derrida's binary theory of "différence." On the contrary, Jones insists that feminists should move outside the male-centered binary logic. Feminists need not ask how women are different from men, but need to know "how women have come to be who they are through history, which is the history of their oppression by men and male-designed institutions" (369). Jones continues: "Only through an analysis of the power relationships between men and women, and practices based on that analysis, will we put an end to our oppression — and only then will we discover what women are or can be" (369).

Her third objection is turned to the concept of femininity as a bundle of characteristics common to every woman's psychosexual make up. She points
out the racial, national, and tribal differences among women, and doubts "whether one libidinal voice, however nonphallocentrically defined, can speak to the economic and cultural problems of all women" (371). Again, Jones considers women's various social situations as more important matter for feminists to struggle with than a monolithic vision of shared female sexuality.

Lastly, Jones presents the crucial question for women's writing:

Can the body be the source of a new discourse? Is it possible, assuming an unmediated and jouissant (or, more likely, a positively reconstructed) sense of one's body, to move from that state of unconscious excitation directly to a written female text? (372)

According to Jones, phallocentric language which French feminists attempt to deconstruct cannot be the only target for transformation. Rather, "the context for women's discourses needs to be thought through and broadened out" (373). And consequently, women's unmediated writing should be recognized as a conscious response to socioliterary realities, rather than as "an overflow of one woman's unmediated communication with her body" (374).

Jones's objections reveal crucial problems which we should consider when we read French feminist texts. Jones doubts the adequacy of employing psychoanalysis as a dogmatic method for the study of women. As an anti-essentialist and a psychosocialist, she suggests that feminists should consider women's social experiences rather than search for their essential sexuality beyond their social contexts. For her, l'écriture féminine, regardless of women's social realities, is impractical. However, in spite of Jones's objections, French feminists' search for the meaning of women's sexuality is still worth being considered on account of their recognition of how women differ from what men think they are. In the rest of this paper, I will seek to
elaborate a rereading of Cixous’s texts that can withstand Jones’s objections to French feminism and yet provide a different interpretation of French feminism from the one Jones offers us.

The Influence of Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Derridian Deconstruction on Cixous’s Theory

Cixous’s theory is a response to Lacan’s psychoanalysis and, at the same time, is a reworking of Derrida’s deconstructionist theory of “différence.” Her theory starts from her skepticism about Lacan’s notion of the phallus as the transcendental signifier in the human psyche and about Derrida’s understanding of language as a binary system in which femininity is always negative. In short, she is skeptical of the prevailing phallocentric linguistic code in which woman has been defined as man’s negative opposite, and also skeptical of the definition of woman in the phallocentric language system. One of her major projects is to reconsider the language itself in order to deconstruct the woman’s body textualized in phallocentric language.

Annette Kuhn describes the Lacanian notion of the relationship between language and human subjectivity as follows:

According to the Lacanian model, the human subject is not only a speaking subject with an Unconscious, but also a masculine or feminine subject in relation to the Oedipus complex. Sexual difference is seen as structured by the subject’s relation to the phallus, the signifier which stands in for the play of absence and presence that constitutes language. Because the oedipal moment inaugurates sexual difference in relation to the phallus as signifier, men and women enter language differently, and Lacan’s argument is that the female entry into language is organized by lack, or negativity. (1981:37)

In Lacan’s theory, language is a symbolic order in which the phallus signifies power and control; therefore woman, since she does not possess the
phallus, has no access in her own right to the symbolic order.

Cixous applies this Lacanian notion of language to her study of Derrida's theory of "differance." Originally, Derrida's deconstructionist theory is his reworking of Saussure's logocentric notion of language. In Saussure's theory, language is an abstract system, made up of chains of signs. Each sign consists of a signifier (sound image) and signified (concept the signifier identifies) related to each other in an arbitrary manner. In contrast to Saussure's logocentrism, in which each signifier has its self-consciously fixed signifieds, Derrida's theory does not admit any single fixed signified unless it is distinguished from its opposite by its difference from the other. In her study of Derrida's notion of language as a binary system based on the distinction of the difference between the couple, Cixous notices that Derrida's binary oppositions, for example, activity/passivity, head/heart, intelligible/sensitive and logos/pathos, are related to the dichotomy of man/woman, and that these hierarchized oppositions are constructed so as to subordinate the feminine to the masculine order. In this phallocentric language system, woman is identified only as man's other.

In both Derrida's and Lacan's theories, woman, deprived of her subjectivity in language, becomes a mere object which is to be defined in the phallocentric linguistic code. In such phallocentric language, woman is identified with man's other in a negative way — the lack of a penis, and eventually, the lack of the phallus — rather than with an autonomous being who possesses a vagina. Given this notion of woman's position in phallocentric language, Cixous feels the necessity of escaping from masculine language in order to reconstruct woman's subjectivity outside the masculine linguistic code.

In "Sorties" (1981b), Cixous clarifies her intention of challenging the phallocentrism and logocentrism of language. She attacks both Freudian and Lacanian interpretations of sexual difference in which the female is
characterized as a lack. Eventually, her target is to deconstruct woman's body, which is identified with the lack in the masculine texts. Woman's body in the masculine discourses is repressed and misrepresented, and therefore no longer belongs to woman. In contrast, by examining woman's body and sexual pleasure in the prelinguistic stage, she suggests that "woman's libidinal economy is neither identifiable by a man nor referable to the masculine economy" (Cixous 1981b:95). Considering the essential impossibility of correctly representing woman's body and sexual pleasure in masculine language, she insists that it is necessary for woman to express her own body and sexual pleasure in woman's discourse which is free from phallocentrism.

Answer to Jones's Objections

1) Gender/Sexuality, Psychosocial analysis/Psychoanalysis.

Jones's first objection to French feminism is that French feminism investigates woman's sexuality rather than her gender, and also that it employs psychoanalysis rather than psychosocial analysis as its method. Considering that "there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture" (Geertz 1973:49), we must say Jones's emphasis on the cultural influence on woman is worth notice. However, Jones fails to see the fact that woman's gender originates in her female sexuality. Without her female sexuality, including her body, woman is not forced to get female gender. In other words, woman's gender-identified suffering in the patriarchal society arises from her sexuality.

The notion that sexuality exists prior to gender is what radical feminists deal with. In radical feminism, what causes woman's oppression in patriarchal society is not her gender but her sexual reality. However, contrary to radical feminism, Cixous's theory investigates not a reality of female sexuality but the female sexuality textualized in male discourse. In
Cixous's theory, what is suffering is woman's sexuality itself because woman's body, which visually symbolizes woman's sexuality, is repressed and misrepresented by the masculine textualization of it in phallocentric language. What we believe to be a woman's body in masculine discourse is in fact a misrepresented and distorted figure, which is, therefore, different from the original shape. Thus misrepresented, the female body determines what woman experiences in the society to some extent. Psychosocial analysis of woman's experiences, if it disregards the fact of misrepresentation of female sexuality in the masculine language as the cause of those experiences, only brings a superficial understanding of woman's oppression in patriarchal society.

Cixous's psychoanalysis of woman's sexuality does not neglect the historical context of woman's body. For her, the history of woman's oppression is the history of how woman's body has been defined in phallocentric language. According to her, history has never produced nor recorded anything but phallocentrism (Cixous 1981b:96). Consequently, after noticing that the historical background of woman's oppression is nothing but the phallocentric definition of womanhood, Cixous feels the need to approach woman's body as pre-defined by the symbolic order to go beyond the patriarchal definition of woman.

2) Binarism

Cixous's main project is to escape from the phallocentric definition of woman in both Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridian deconstruction. In order to modify woman's body which has been misrepresented in male discourse, she needs to deconstruct male discourse itself. Moreover, in order to deconstruct it, she has to play into the hands of the enemy — male discourse. This fact gives the impression that she is imprisoned in a male-centered binary logic. In one sense, Jones's rebuke of Cixous's participation in this binary logic is proper. Cixous deconstructs the
phallocentric binary opposition of man and woman, in which woman is characterized as the lack of a phallus, only to create a new binarism — man/woman, penis/vagina and clitoris, monosexual/bisexual. However, the crucial difference between male-centered binarism and Cixous's new binarism is that while woman's voice is completely excluded from the former binarism, it is reflected in the latter one. Female-initiated understanding of the man/woman dichotomy is necessary for Cixous in order to express woman's experience in woman's discourse. As long as woman accepts the male-centered binarism in which woman is deprived of access to it, she has no way to express her experience.

3) Essentialism

Jones's another complaint involves Cixous's apparent essentialism. Jones understands Cixous's notion of woman's body as an identification of woman's body with an essential femininity. However, there is no universal and ahistorical female body indicated in Cixous's texts. On the contrary, Cixous urges woman to write herself — her own body, not a universal female body. In the opening paragraph of "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), she says:

I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies — for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text — as into the world and into history — by her own movement. (875)

In this passage, Cixous does not mention any fixed body. On the contrary, it is obvious that she respects each woman's particular understanding of her own body. The only thing she emphasizes is that woman's notion of her own body will be different from what is described as "a woman's body" in male discourse.
4) Woman's Body and Woman's Discourse

Jones's last objection is turned to Cixous's treatment of phallocentric language as the only target for transformation as well as to her treatment of woman's body as the source of woman's discourse. Careful reading of Cixous's texts, however, reveals that woman's body is not a source of woman's discourse in her theory. On the contrary, woman's body is what woman should retrieve from its repressed state in phallocentric language and should write into her own discourse. As I said above, woman's body has been repressed, misrepresented, and distorted in phallocentric language, and woman, who has no access to that language, has nothing to do with her own body which has been misrepresented in the male-centered linguistic code. In this phallocentric language system, woman loses her autonomous voice. Woman's body, sexuality, desire, autonomy, subjectivity—these things are thoroughly repressed in the phallocentric discourse. Nevertheless, woman, silenced in the phallocentric order, is not allowed to express how she feels about this repression. With this notion of the phallocentric linguistic system, it is natural for Cixous to challenge phallocentric language itself as her target for deconstruction, because without deconstructing it, woman is silenced.

Jones's misunderstanding of l'écriture féminine is a common fault of some anti-essentialists. But at the same time, her understanding of French feminism obviously shows the differences between American academic feminism and postmodernist French feminism. As to these differences, Arleen B. Dallery suggests the following:

one [American academic feminism] emphasizes the empirical, the irreducible reality of woman's experience; the other [French feminism] emphasizes the primacy of discourse, woman's discourse, without which there is no experience— to speak of. (1986:52-53)
Noticing these differences, Dallery argues that "American feminist privileging of experience may lead to critical misreadings of French feminism" (54). Jones's misreading of Cixous's texts is the typical case of an American feminist's misreading of l'écriture féminine.

Problems of l'Écriture Féminine

Patricia Waugh sees "two broad tendencies in the postmodern critique of grand narratives and subversion of the purely rational" (1992:19). According to her, "both emphasise art as a form of bodily experience, but one emphasising the situation of body in the world, the other emphasising body as the source of potential transformation of that world" (19). The former criticism often draws its philosophical justification from the "Heideggerian notion of radical situatedness" (19), and the latter draws from the "Nietzschean radical fictionality (arising out of the body)" (21). In the Nietzschean version of postmodernism, the self is an "instinctual, bodily driven, precariously held equilibrium" (20), and it exists "in its ability to work with the fragments available to it and from them to project on the world new fictions by which to live" (20). Obviously Cixous's concept of l'écriture féminine belongs to the Nietzschean version of postmodern theory. As Waugh suggests that "the Nietzschean may destroy both self and other in its imperialistic violence" (23), the concept of l'écriture féminine possesses its problem.

As I said above, Cixous's theory accuses Lacanian psychoanalysis of phallocentrism. For Lacan, one acquires one's gendered subjectivity when one enters the symbolic order. In order to enter the symbolic order, one must experience the Oedipal crisis. In the pre-Oedipal period, one believes in the unity between oneself and the mother, but at the moment of the Oedipal crisis, the unity is split up by the father and one accepts the phallus as representation of the Law of the Father in the symbolic order. As the
acquisition of language is related to the entry into the symbolic order, woman, in order to acquire the prevailing linguistic code, must cut off her pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother and must situate herself in relation to the father, identifying herself by the lack of a penis.

In order to reconstruct the female subjectivity outside the masculine linguistic code, Cixous develops the theory of woman’s language — *l'écriture féminine*, which one can acquire through reconciliation with the mother in the pre-Oedipal stage. Since in Lacanian notion the pre-Oedipal stage is thought to be the stage in which one has not yet finished the process of acquiring the linguistic code, however, the pre-Oedipal stage is considered as the pre-linguistic stage. In this sense, because *l'écriture féminine* is a pre-linguistic text, what is described in it becomes only imagery, an ambiguous figure.

In “Castration or Decapitation?” (1981a) Cixous suggests to look not at syntax but at the fantasy of women’s writing. It indicates that *l'écriture féminine* is no longer language but pre-linguistic imagery. She presents the characteristics of *l'écriture féminine* as follows:

all the feminine texts I’ve read are very close to the voice, very close to the flesh of language, much more so than masculine texts...perhaps because there’s something in them that’s freely given, perhaps because they don’t rush into meaning, but are straightway at the threshold of feeling. There’s tactility in the feminine text, there’s touch, and this touch passes through the ear. 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. (1981a:54)

In short, feminine writing possesses a power of “touch” which passes through the ears. However, in spite of its power of touch, *l'écriture féminine* does not
express textual meaning directly. The problem of Cixous’s theory is that it confuses speech and writing. (Cixous’s confusion of speech and writing is also revealed in her “The Laugh of the Medusa.”) But the more crucial problem is that, because of its indirectness, l’écriture féminine is not suitable for a critical text. The use of it is restricted only to an aesthetic creative writing such as poetry. In this sense, the concept is impractical although its theoretical notion that language is phallocentric is worthy of consideration.

*This essay is based on the paper read at the monthly meeting of Japan Association of Comparative Culture, Kansai, at Kyoto on May 16, 1992.

NOTES

1 As to the analysis of the postmodern theories, part of this essay repeats what I have already discussed in my articles, “Willa Cather’s My Ántonia and Écriture Féminine” (1992) and “Swimming into the ‘Semiotic’ Chora: A French Feminist Reading of Kate Chopin’s The Awakening” (1994).

2 According to an anti-essentialist Diana Fuss, essentialism is a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the “whatness” of a given entity. In contrast, anti-essentialists reject any transhistorical, eternal, immutable essences which, essentialists believe, naturalize human nature.

3 As to the influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridian deconstruction on (French) feminism, see both Weedon’s Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory (1987) and Moi’s Sexual/Textual Politics (1985).

4 Derridean term “differance” can be translated both as “difference” and as “deferral” [cf. Moi 1985]. In the feminist context, this term implies that sexual difference is constructed through the potentially endless process of referring to the other, and that the differentiation is always deferred.

5 As to the following summary of Saussure’s theory, I chiefly refer to Weedon’s Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory.

6 As to radical feminism, see Jaggar’s Feminist Politics and Human Nature (1988)

7 As to the difference between writing and speech, Culler suggests that speech is more effective to indicate the speaker's intention (1982).

**Works Cited**


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