

## Daughter of Writing

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### Mother Writ Large with Hélène Cixous

*This essay explores Hélène Cixous's use of maternal generative processes, especially birth-giving subjectivities, as the basis for new conceptions of writing. I then expand upon aspects of the mother-daughter relationship at the heart of a series of Cixous's recent novels or fictions. Hélène Cixous's oeuvre includes feminist literary and poetic-theoretic essays, novels, and theatre pieces. She is most famous in North America for her 1976 essay "The Laugh of the Medusa." Yet further translations of Cixous's prolific works are less known to English readers. I hope to reevaluate Hélène Cixous as an important writer in the field of motherhood studies and beyond. Although maternal subjectivities are still often unwritten and undervalued grounds, with Cixous, mothers and daughters are central texts for living and art. In Cixous, "Mother," writ large, becomes fused with the act of writing. Mother is a double figure who occupies both life and art—the progenitor of both. She is perhaps the Mother of all books, so that Cixous is surely the daughter of writing.*

### Daughter of Writing: Mother Writ Large with Hélène Cixous

Hélène Cixous is a writer, literary theorist, and educational innovator, residing in Paris, France. I herein explore Cixous's notion of writing as related to, and originating from, maternal generative processes of birth giving and the body. I will also inquire into the mother-daughter relationship at the heart of one of Cixous's recent novels, or "fictions," as she prefers to call them. Her fictions circle around daily life and often characterize her own aging, one-hundred-year-old mother, Eve, who is written into a whole corpus of books spanning the last ten to fifteen years. This includes *Eve Escapes*, the title from which I draw.

## Reading Cixous

Famous in North America for her 1976 translated essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Hélène Cixous, in a Canadian context, is most often studied in French literary theory or read by Anglo-feminist scholars in translation through the configuration known as “the French feminists” (Cavallaro). For English readers, Cixous’s large corpus of work is little known beyond this 1976 essay. Yet Cixous continues to write and publish at least one book per year in French, and many, but not all of her texts are translated into English.

Although I had known of Cixous as a French feminist, her fictions further captivated me when I was a doctoral student. I was working as research assistant on a project seeking to expand the creative practice of life writing in education (Chambers et al.). The other researchers and I drew inspiration from feminist authors encouraging women and marginalized peoples to write their untold stories, subjectivities, and lives (Anzaldua). Reading Cixous in this light provoked my own thinking, writing, and arts-based research, and inspired my sense of creative license in storytelling. This provocative Cixous-effect is noted by other visual artists, writers, and researchers, including Elizabeth Chapman Hoult. Hoult, for example, describes how reading Cixous has helped her to develop her creative voice in educational research on the topic of resilient adult learning. She explains Cixous’s effect on her writing as a “protective textual love” (144) in resisting the “oppressive ... project of masculine economy” (17) at work in traditional, androcentric research methods.

My continued interest in Cixous comes from reading authors who explore birth-based and mother-daughter themes in storytelling and art. My background in lay midwifery compels my research into mother-centred birth care and stories, as I reevaluate birth and mothering as foundations for culture at large (e.g., “To Be a Midwife” and “How She Becomes”). Feminist studies of motherhood, mothering, and maternal theory (O’Reilly) have pushed me further in this creative work. Though maternal subjectivities are still often unwritten and undervalued grounds, with Cixous, mothers and daughters become central texts for living and art.

### Birthing Texts: “My Flesh Signs the Book”

Hélène Cixous was born Jewish in Algeria in 1937 during the French occupation. Cixous’s mother had been a refugee from Nazi Germany. The family survived World War Two in Algeria, and they were later exiled to France. Her father, a doctor, died of tuberculosis not long after the war. Growing up in North Africa, along with early experiences of death, exile, and the anti-Semitism the family faced, informed Cixous’s understandings of the vulnerability of life and

the limits to human freedom imposed by persecution, racism, sexism, and war. From youth onwards, her love of literature and reading propelled and nourished her intellect, ultimately spurring her entrance to writing.

Cixous's writing favours the powers of human creativity, life and love, over forces of destruction and death. Yet to read Cixous is to read death, or to read life, against the losses inherent in death. She writes, "The first book I wrote rose from my father's tomb" (*Three Steps* 11). Death becomes the precondition for writing "life." Life continues with its vital potential from the losses in death that cannot be reconciled. In *Coming to Writing*, Cixous delineates the relationship of death to life via love itself, as she describes how, "I armed love, with soul and words, to keep death from winning" (2). Furthermore, writing, for Cixous, is an act of love that resists death, persecution, and war: "Oh! I am the army of love—to love, alas, one must first embody the fight; this was my first knowledge; that life is fragile and death holds the power. That life, occupied as it is with loving, hatching, watching, caressing, singing, is threatened by hatred and death, and must defend itself" (*Coming to Writing* 24).

On this subject of "hatching" life, Cixous's mother Eve became a midwife after her father's death, to support her young family as the head of household in Algeria. In Cixous's texts, birth is the generative force that undergirds life and becomes a signifier for the creative force of both life and new forms of writing. Cixous must have attended births with her midwife mother, as she writes descriptively of mothers giving birth. She evokes a creatively linked relationship between women's self-power in birth and writing,

Then, her glorious strength! Giving birth as one swims, exploiting the resistance of the flesh, of the sea, the work of the breath ... body after her own body, the woman follows herself, meets herself.... She gives birth.... She has her source. She draws deeply. She releases. Laughing. And in the wake of a child, a squall of Breath! A longing for text! ... A child! Paper! Milk. Ink. Nursing time, And Me? I'm hungry too. The milky taste of ink! (*Coming to Writing* 30-31)

Thus, both child and mother feed from the birth experience. I love and appreciate Cixous's view of women's strength in giving birth, as she views it as a self-actualizing and self-resourcing process. This theme is mirrored in midwifery-based views of birth giving. Midwifery philosophy values mothers' self-power in the birth-giving process and places importance on supporting and being with the body, mind and emotions of the birthing mother. This form of care counters the domination of mothers' birth experiences through hierarchical authority and over use of medical interventions. Perhaps Eve's

studies and work as a midwife in Algeria influenced Cixous's views and uses of mother-centred, birth-giving metaphors for writing.

In addition, as Cixous weaves connections between writing and birth, her insistence on the female desire for the child runs counter to a normative focus on mothers' pain and fear in birth. Although birth pain and resistance may be experientially true, this single focus misses the ecstatic potential of sensation, longing, and love that mothers can also feel. There can be great pleasure and relief upon arrival of the baby, who is the mother's living creation. Although women's generative capacities have been (and still are) forced, controlled and regulated through patriarchal relations, Cixous draws from an empowered sense of women's birthing capacities. She recovers the maternal toward women's choices, experiences, and their uses.

Cixous's early essay, *Laugh of the Medusa*, is a bold, manifesta-like call for women to write their lives, and also draws from maternal origins. In the essay, Cixous urges women to reclaim their desires, sexualities, and bodies from repression and oppression in patriarchal society and the phallogocentric order. She understands well the link between the "repression of women's bodies" and "the repression of [women's] writing" (Segarra 20). If the body is free, so too is the writing, in a reciprocal relationship. Cixous implores women to creatively script the subjects of their lives and bodies, and to defy normative conventions of writing: "Women must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (*Laugh of the Medusa* 875).

Upon the essay's publication, Cixous's astute and imaginative use of language and metaphor captivated North American readers. She uses an unsuppressed figure of the gestating and birthing mother as the creative source for writing, which is expressed through a pleasurable, bodied, and pregnant longing:

just like the desire to write: a desire to live from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood ... the unsurpassed pleasures of pregnancy which have actually been always exaggerated or conjured away—or cursed—in the classic texts. For if there's one thing that's been repressed here's the place to find it: in the taboo of the pregnant woman. (*Laugh of the Medusa* 891)

Cixous theorizes writing from the generative powers of the maternal body, through a self-sensing subjectivity that is freed from paternalistic containment and limited understandings of such. She continues to name a lived and creative relationship between the free force of gestation and the desire to write, as in the "oral drive, anal drive, vocal drive—all these drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive—just like the desire to write: A desire to

live self from within” (*Laugh of the Medusa* 891). In this, Cixous recuperates the maternal as a site of physical, social, cultural, and artistic creation. Although birth has been relegated to and regulated by the patriarchal sidelines of *bis*-story, when Cixous links actual birth giving to writing, she bypasses the dualistic split of nature from culture. Splitting off nature from culture and body from mind disregards the maternal body and its powers. Historically in Western patriarchy, the body-mind agency of giving birth has been accorded lower value than the creation of cultural texts. Counter to this, Cixous situates maternal generative capacities as *the source* for culture, art, and text. With Cixous, ongoing birth-giving analogies return the co-opted power of birth to the maternal capacity for creation. I do not see this as an essentialist stance that limits women to birth-giving roles. Rather, I understand Cixous as pushing mother-centered and mother-valuing notions of birth toward new philosophical and creative vistas.

Going further in her essay *Coming to Writing*, Cixous describes writing as an act of birthing and nursing the self: “Writing ... to give birth to myself and to nurse myself, too. Life summons life” (31). In this sense, writing can be a process of *re-mothering*, of providing care and attention to oneself. Through writing, subjectivity is born and re-born, mothered and re-mothered, in a re-generative cycle of co-creation that frees the writer to dispel limitations while she explores and nourishes her subjective potential. In this sense, writing is a maternal self-act of creation in which ongoing birthings and transformations of self are possible. As Cixous says, “a woman is never far from ‘mother.’ ... There is always within her a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink” (*Laugh of the Medusa* 881). When subjectivity is written through “white ink,” a descriptive term rooted in breastfeeding relations, writing enacts the transformative potential to give birth to, nurse, and re-mother new selves. Here, subjectivity is not fixed but endlessly opened through creative, birthing, nourishing, and milky relations.

Cixous conceives of writing as being *of the body*, with its lived tempo and movement: “My flesh signs the book, it is rhythm. Medium my body, rhythmic my writing” (*Coming to Writing* 53). Writing is an urge from the body to give birth to a parallel form in art in which “the breath wants a form” (10) so that “life becomes the text starting out from [the] body” (52). As in conjoining birth to writing (like twins), the body is a text to be read and written. These playful idioms reveal writing as being a creative force rooted in the power and agency of the maternal body, which gives birth contiguously to writing and the self.

### Writing Life: Not Literally but Literarily

Hélène Cixous continues to explore bodied life writing in her narrative novels

as she writes about her mother, Eve. In these novels, the relationship between art and life becomes further rooted in the maternal, or Mother writ large. I use the capitalized term of “Mother” and suggest her to be “writ large” in order to play with my idea of Cixous’s writing process as being rooted in maternal subjectivities. My use of the capitalized term “Mother” refers to real mothers, as in any ordinary mother, including Cixous’s own mother. Yet “Mother writ large” is both a large-than-life character, with Goddess-like powers and subliminal agency, and a figure of speech. In this way, the capitalized Mother is an informing and forming figure, perhaps a muse of the text, which is drawn from the maternal minutia of daily life. More than muse, this is Mother writ large: a force field of maternal, regenerative powers of writing and life itself.

In the context of her life writing, Cixous’s mother-daughter texts are original in their focus on an aging mother who is the lynchpin of entire narratives. The writer, as the adult daughter, writes and muses through the needs and presence of her mother. In these texts, the mother becomes fused with the act of writing. In an uncanny and perhaps revelatory way, mother is a double figure who occupies both life and art—the progenitor and birth giver of both. She is perhaps, the Mother of all books, so that Cixous is surely the daughter of writing.

Cixous’s novels, or fictions, are inspired by people and events from her life. Yet she does not identify her work as autobiographical but as a form of life writing (Cixous and Calle-Gruber). This type of writing involves much creative license with characters and events, hence her preferred use of the term “fictions.” Particular characters become familiar to readers of her books, including Eve, the aging mother, and Cixous, the daughter writer. Cixous does not follow her characters literally but *literarily*. Her literary reading life populates her writing life, including authors such as Joyce, Kafka, Tsvetayeva, and Lispector (*Readings*). She poetically discusses and draws from their various tomes in her literary theory. Yet in her fictive works, these authors and characters from their books walk through the narratives themselves, as if alive in the text. Such is the case with Sigmund Freud in *Eve Escapes*, who plays himself in the book, with his inability to dream at the end of his life. In this way, authors and characters come to life in Cixous’s writing. Such authors also reflect Cixous’s poetic-theoretic concerns with writing, in what she once called “l’écriture féminine.” Cixous has indeed encouraged women to write, yet she further explains how she did not mean to create a “feminine writing” but used this term “to let into writing what has been forbidden up until now” (*White Ink* 52). The authors whom she reads often bear the process of writing in self-conscious ways, writing from the depths of the unconscious and the body.

As a writer, Cixous especially engages in word play. In the English editions, Cixous’s French wordplay is underappreciated as it cannot be directly translated

(Diocaretz and Segarra). For example, this is noted by translator Susan Sellers in Cixous's use of the word "né," meaning "newly born," in her novel *The Day I Wasn't There*. The French title plays on the sound of "né" in its reading, *Le jour ou je n'étais pas là*, Sellers explains how Cixous's homophonic play in the French simultaneously refers to "nais," meaning "how something looks," which then becomes "a nose," as in the French "nez" (*Translating the Enigma* 34). The nose reference speaks to the racialization of Jewish identity, and Cixous's mother's once insistence that she "have her nose shortened in order to appear less Jewish" (34). Cixous's triple entendre of "né" highlights how her provocative narratives fall around words in themselves, which creates multiple embedded story lines.

In this way and others, Cixous bypasses and exceeds conventional writing styles and genres. Cixous is a poststructuralist artist, who does not write her subjects in traditional narrative structures but opens multiple views and storylines through her linguistic midwifery. Subjectivity is written through fluid, birth-giving processes of becoming. Cixous writes performative texts, in which people can free (and see) themselves through language and daily life rather than being fixed by linguistic, social, or political categories. In this way, the figure of Eve, Cixous's mother, is as much a constructed and a deconstructed mother as a real one. As in the idea of Mother writ large, Eve is a mother force field at work in writing, threading throughout the series of books. Eve grounds often circumambulating, dreamlike narratives that play on endless literary references, metaphors, signifiers, and wordplay. This is revelatory writing from the maternal, which draws its dialogues and narratives from the minutiae of mother-daughter relations.

### Eve and Hélène

*Eve Escapes: Ruins and Life* is a book written at the end of Eve's long life, who lives to be over one hundred years old. Cixous, the daughter, is the distracted writer of books, who cares for her elderly mother. Their personalities contrast so that this mother-daughter dyad is the driving engine of the book. Alongside Eve, figures such as Sigmund Freud, the Tower home of Montaigne, and the entrance and exit to dreams, all come to bear in Cixous's collage-like narratives.

Eve, the once midwife, is practical and down to earth in living her long life. She does not suffer fools and loves and admires her brilliant daughter. While caring for her, Cixous, the daughter, equally relies on her still living mother. Yet Cixous, the writer, is almost always torn between the need to be with and care for her mother and the need to write. These two women have lived life's passages of exile and loss with and through each other and through a resilient, matricentric family life. They are the continuance of life through the births of Cixous's own children and the births of books in Cixous's creative and prolific

writing career. Thus, this daughter is always torn between the demands of Mother and Writing, each writ large. Mother and writing as Art are continually at play, at odds, and are, ultimately, united throughout the book.

The tensions are particularly evident in her chapter titled “The Prisoner’s Dream,” in which Cixous visits her beloved Tower of Montaigne, which still stands as a historical monument in the French countryside. Michel de Montaigne was a French philosopher who wrote in the sixteenth century. He was the progenitor of the modern notion of the essay, in that French sense of the verb “*essayer*,” meaning, “to try.” His writings meld anecdotes and autobiographical details with serious intellectual inquiry. Notice the lineage here and Cixous’s devotion to him as her forefather of creative letters. Montaigne inhabited a castle tower in the countryside that housed his library with inspiring artwork and maxims painted all over its walls. The Tower of Montaigne has a particular mythic capacity for Cixous in the French landscape. She cites it as a tower that is also like a tree, being an almost mother-like source of French culture, language, and writing. Cixous’s visits to the Tower, actual or imagined, are imbued with her great devotion to this source of art and writing. Her visits also provoke incredible tensions, as they always involve a forced separation from her mother, who cannot travel with her. As Cixous writes:

To come back to my mother, the idea occurs to me that I never do anything but come back to my mother, when I return to the Tower, I go from my mother to the Tower and as soon as I leave my mother behind I go as quickly as possible toward the Tower so as to come back to my mother with the tense urgency that stirs me ... thereupon as soon as I see the sayings inscribed on the beams of the Library of Montaigne, I see the sayings of my mother ... I go from my mother to the Tower it’s as if I was going from my mother to a double of my mother. (*Eve Escapes* 20-21)

Visiting the tower signifies Cixous’s devotion to the space of writing, which appears equal to her devotion to her mother. Such devotion involves movements from the mother role to the writing one, and then back again. The Tower, in fact, appears to her as “a double of my mother.” Cixous thus goes from mother to mother, or Mother to Mother. My capitalization of Mother also plays on the ways in which Cixous will at times capitalize a specific word in her texts, as if to create a signifier for multiple, extended, or layered meanings. In this instance of Cixous visiting the Tower, of great note is the force with which Eve is equated with writing itself. It is as if her mother (as the Tower) also signifies the act of writing, being the source and location for all creation.



As previously analyzed, maternal generative capacities sit at the heart of Cixous's conception of writing. Furthermore, Cixous writes about the tensions of travelling from life to art, and art to life, as felt by any overworked artist-mother-caregiver, as she traverses this seemingly impossible gap over and over again. The reader feels the tensions inherent in Cixous's movements between overwhelming commitments to her caregiving and to her art. Yet equal to these tensions is the implicit realization that there is no art, or no writing, without the life force and experience that gives birth to it, and the demands of living relations. Cixous writes in such a way that Mother and Art keep arriving together in one text, despite (or because of) the difficulty of maintaining both.

Echoing earlier passages in Cixous's writing about birth, Eve the mother satisfies features of nourishment and succor for her daughter. Cixous describes the experience in the following way:

When I look at the body that is my mother stretched out on the couch, that is to say the body she offers up to my gaze with a smile unlimited in time.... I absorb some immaterial and desirable substance that emanates from her and from me, I am but a wide avid soul, a spiritual mouth and tongue, which aspires to pump the vital saps, the teeming visions, the luminous pastures, I graze on everything that is my mother.... I take sustenance from what she is, constant, tenacious, centuries-rich, without bitterness, and I suckle, thinking: once again today I lack for nothing, but tomorrow. Pause. (*Eve Escapes* 57)

Thus, even in old age, Cixous continues to nurse from her mother, who is life itself. The writer writes (suckles) at the breast of life. Such a paragraph opens the field of writing from its living source, writing that grazes "on everything that is [her] mother" in the body of life. Once again, Mother endlessly provides and nourishes what becomes text.

In reading the line "but tomorrow," the daughter's ever-present fears of her aging mother's impending death become clear. Cixous does not shy from the subject of death. It is a precondition for writing. Yet death approaches over a period of years for Eve, and neither mother nor daughter knows when it will arrive. The source of life and death in mother and daughter is inexorably connected. Birth, from its reproductive urge in continuance of the species, signals the eventual death of those who give it. Daughter replaces mother, and so on, into endless chains of recreation—a key mystery from which the fluid saps of writing also run. In this way, Cixous all but enters the death of her mother, in reflection of her own life and death: "Dying? A way of living. I am dying of your old age... I am living on your old age. I follow it. I walk at Dawn. On

the path everything is being born. Invitation to being. Meanwhile I walk with your death at my heels" (*Eve Escapes* 33).

In light of these maternal, eternal mysteries of birth and death cycles of life, I conclude my exploration of Hélène Cixous with a passage from her text *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*. Cixous notes that writing is "a difficult apprenticeship, but it has to be tried. For instance, if we are in joy and in love with writing, we should try to write the *imund book*. The *imund book* deals with things, birds, and words that are forbidden by Those He.... It is ... the book that takes life and language by the roots" (156). I suggest that with Cixous, this *imund book* may be that of the Mother, of the maternal powers at the roots of "life and language." Cixous opens many literary, linguistic, and narrative doors that allow the free passage of potent maternal energies, too long forbidden full acknowledgement by "Those He." Cixous specifically capitalizes the gendered pronoun "He" in the way I am playing with the word "Mother" throughout this essay. "He," in this instance, likely refers to the dominant patriarchal order, signified by this masculine pronoun as having prohibitive authority and privilege over other genders and creative actions. As demonstrated, Cixous is highly aware of the sexed power dynamics that deny women's, mothers' and others' bodies, minds, and birth-giving creations. Cixous specifically recuperates a creative maternal order for living, writing, and art in her mother-centred, birthing texts. She invites us to live and write the *imund book* beyond "Those He." Cixous encourages us to write the storied life worlds and words of our mother-daughter lines in white ink, from which all sentences are born. Reading Hélène Cixous's bodied books propels new understanding of the relationship between the maternal and writing itself. Into this birthing book of life, writing is born from the creative creature of Mother herself. And we may become the daughters of writing.

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