Autobiography as a Spectropoetics of the Mother

On Hélène Cixous’ Recent Works

1. The Forgotten Formal Paradigm of Autobiography

Between 1999 and 2001, the Jewish-Algerian-French writer Hélène Cixous has published five books of autobiographical literature: Osnabrück, Les rêveries de la femme sauvage, Le jour où je n’étais pas là, Portrait de Jacques Derrida en Jeune Saint Juif, and Benjamin à Montaigne. Il ne faut pas le dire.¹ In each of these books, Cixous presents an intimate scene of struggle with the raw and dissimulated materials of her own life and writing. If we follow the clues given in her titles, each of these scenes (re)stages a different incident of inaccessibility or separation, which then initiates an autobiographical act about what is inaccessible or separate: her mother’s lost birthplace Osnabrück, her own childhood in colonial Algeria, her absence at the death of her infant son, her problems with her Jewish-Algerian-French identity and autobiography in terms of the poetics of sexual and cultural difference, or the silenced story of her great uncle Benjamin who was driven away from home by his and her own family.

To these initiating scenes of her own life, Cixous juxtaposes readings of other autobiographical scenes of such historical, psychic, cultural, and narrative inaccessibility or separation. Thus, she draws a «notcatholic» portrait of the Jewish-Algerian-French philosopher Jacques Derrida and his autobiographical text Circonfession. Cixous’ Portrait, pretending to follow in the narrative footsteps of Augustine’s classical and Rousseau’s modern Confessions as well as Joyce’s modernist Portrait, offers a culturally different counterpart to their autobiographical enterprises and a sexually and poetically different counterpart to her own. I shall return to this divided counter-imagery of autobiographical writing later. In her latest book, she also studies and rewrites the Essais and travel diaries of the Renaissance author Michel de Montaigne, who has often been acclaimed and recently much debated as the creator of both modern autobiography and

ethnography. Cixous «intimizes» and secretly reshapes this initial figure of autobiography in terms of a logic of the *ethnos*. Next to her own great uncle Benjamin, Montaigne appears at the threshold of her latest life writing as it becomes subtitled by the unspeakable: *Benjamin à Montaigne. Il ne faut pas le dire*.

Within the logic of the *ethnos*, Michel de Montaigne inaugurates autobiography as a work of and on the unspeakable in his own inheritance. He also becomes tangible as a figure that has been dissimulated on the margins of literary history and theory: as a descendant of *marranos* and the son of a Spanish-Jewish mother («[une] Espagnolle de la maison de Lopes»), who would have had to conceal his maternal-cultural origin in the face of the unforgiving attitude towards Judaism in Renaissance Europe. Reaffirming the logic of the *ethnos* in which Montaigne's writing originated, Cixous does not explicitly refer to his inheritance (*il ne faut pas le dire*). Rather, she makes herself an accessory to Montaigne's dissimulation and leaves the detective work to her readers. From within the unsaid, however, a formal paradigm of autobiography, long neglected, seems to reemerge: namely that of the *marrano*-paradigm or the Judeo-Christian origin of a «notcatholic» structure of autobiography. Although it is deeply linked to a crisis of confessions, this paradigm is not confessional. Instead, and within the logic of the *ethnos*, it seems to be linked to criminality. On one side, it secretly responds to the criminalization of an *ethnos* and to the crimes committed

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2 Julia Kristeva credits Montaigne with initiating the weak, divided, fragmented I of modern autobiography and selfhood. James Clifford credits him with initiating modern ethnography, in which exotic cultures are studied mainly as a reflection of the self («Introduction: Partial Truths». In: *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Ed. by James Clifford and George E. Marcus. Berkeley: University of California Press 1986, p.23). Deborah N. Losse has recently argued that Montaigne's quest for self-knowledge and his reworking of the cosmographer's accounts of the New World (to know the Other) run at cross-purposes. She suggests that his view of the inhabitants of the New World as the double of the European rather than as other selves has left, after the fall of the Kings of Peru and Mexico and the shattering of their specular images, only the troubled image of the Self (Deborah N. Losse: «Rewriting Culture: Montaigne Recounts New World Ethnography». In: *Neophilologus* 83 (4), October 1999, pp. 517–528).


4 In 1622, thirty years after Montaigne's death, the King's counsellor and Bordeaux magistrate Pierre de l'Ancre suggested that his maternal genealogy was known to his contemporaries: «Bien qu'on die que le sieur de Montaigne estoit son parent du costé de sa mere qui estoit Espagnolle de la maison de Lopes» (cited in: Elizabeth Mendes Da'Costa: «The Jews» [note 3, p. 10]. Nevertheless, Montaigne has remained silent about his origin throughout his writings.
against it. On the other, it hides the scene of the crime from which it originally emerged: «l’Espagnolle de la maison de Lopes. » We should note, that Montaigne’s maternal origin itself has been constituted historically and according to the complex structure of the criminal in terms of the logic of the *ethnos*: after the post-Spanish-Inquisition influx of Jewish-Iberian exiles to Bordeaux, «Espagnolle» (Spanish) signified «Jewish» without saying it.

In 1999-2000, Cixous held a seminar on autobiographical writing in the framework of her seminar series on the poetics of sexual difference. The title of her seminar — «Le Criminel de Maman ou le goût de poire du châtiment» — Mommy’s Criminal or the taste of the pear of punishment — provides us with further evidence regarding her idea about a criminal paradigm of autobiography. It alludes to Augustine’s famous stolen pears, which, according to Cixous, not only initiated his own writing, but also a larger genetic logic, which applies to the whole course of Western literature: «Une logique génétique est inaugurée dans le verger algérien pour toute la durée de la littérature. Du même jardin naîtront Rousseau ou Derrida (A genetic logic was inaugurated in the Algerian orchard for the whole course of literature. From that same garden, Rousseau or Derrida were born).»

Augustine, who is usually regarded as inaugurating the formal paradigm of confessional autobiography, appears here, rather surprisingly, as initiating a ge-

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5 The seminar was given in collaboration with the DEA in *Etudes Féminines* at Paris VIII and the Collège International de Philosophie. The program included texts by Augustine, Stendhal, Rousseau, Genet, Bernhard, Bachmann, Lispector, Derrida, as well as Cixous’ *Osnabrück* (note 1) and her earlier collection of essays *L’ange au secret* (Paris 1991), containing a relevant piece about literature’s relation to crime («Nous avons besoin de la scène du crime», p.101-112) to which I shall refer in the third part of this paper.

6 The chapter of «The stolen fruit» is in the second book of Augustine’s *Confessions* (*The Confessions of St. Augustine*. Translated, with an Introduction and Notes, by John K. Ryan. New York 1960, pp. 69-70). Here, as well as in the following chapters («Why Men Sin», «The Anatomy of Evil»), Augustine describes his «deed of crime» itself as the object of his desire: «I loved my fault itself», not «that thing which I desired to gain by theft» (ibid., p. 70). He subsequently relates this desire for the crime itself to a «curiosity [which] pretends to be a desire for knowledge», and thus suggests a hidden link between his and Eve’s crime, while discrediting her desire as a pretension. What troubles him, is not his imitation of her crime, but his «perverse» imitation of God: «In a perverse way, all men imitate you who put themselves far from you, and rise up in rebellion against you. Even by such imitation of you they prove that you are the creator of all nature, and that therefore there is no place where they can depart entirely from you» (ibid., p. 73).

7 The citation is from Cixous’ course description (see note 5). I would like to thank Hélène Cixous for inviting me to participate in one of the sessions of her seminar in May 2000. The session was given in collaboration with the writer Annie Leclerc, at that time involved in a writing project for prison inmates, and it dealt with literary and sociological links between imprisonment and autobiographical writing.

8 William C. Spengemann’s seminal work on autobiography dedicates its first chapter to Augustine and the formal paradigm of autobiography as confessional (*William C. Spengemann: The Forms of Autobiography. Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven and London 1980, pp. 1-33). Also recent approaches to Augustine’s *Confessions*, while more radically skeptical about the possibility of a genre definition, reiterate the confessional structure as its central feature; such as Jean François Lyotard’s
etic logic of autobiography in terms of criminality. We again find a mother at the origin of this logic («Mommy’s Criminal»), but in a somewhat different way than in Montaigne’s case. Augustine commits his crime, Cixous says, in honor of his mother and out of desire to be menaced by her. Confession is evoked, but none effected. The logic, or law of the autobiographical genre, dictates that one keep silence about the delicious offence in order to protect the crime and make it the source of further crimes.

Yet this logic also hides another mother in the closet of its crime scene. It does so much less effectively than Montaigne, however. Augustine clearly also committed his petty crime in the Algerian orchard because he wanted to appropriate, by filial imitation, the powerful and original crime that Eve, the mother of humankind, committed in the Garden of Eden. Eve’s picking of the forbidden fruit in pursuit of (self)knowledge as well as her subsequent narrative fabrication of an alibi («it was the snake...») are written all over Augustine’s crime and the genetic logic it would inaugurate. According to the book of Genesis, Eve’s original crime begets human life, along with labor pains and the psychic and social conflicts that arise out of the regulation of relations between the sexes and the work and experience of culture. As its petty imitation, Augustine’s crime begets literature as life writing, along with the labor pains of poetical production, genre rules, and the maternal-cultural conditioning of human life stories.

Between Cixous’ Montaigne and her Augustine and within the genetic logic of literature, we can detect an amazing pattern of reversals, displacements and doublings. This pattern intimately links the crimes that are committed to those that are suffered, as well as confounding the making of life and the making of fiction, painful silences and artful alibis, real and imaginary mothers, psychic and cultural conflicts, maternal and filial acts of inauguration, and Jewish and Catholic frames of reference. Moreover, it replaces autobiography’s traditional psychic subject, the neurotic confessor, with the criminal. We should note that Cixous’ replacement also emerges from a larger Continental feminist interest in redefining the relation between Freud’s work on narcissism and his definitions of feminity and the mother. In her work *L’Enigme de la femme*, Sarah Kofman has suggested that Freud’s approach to femininity conveniently neglects what his earlier introduction to narcissism announced: namely, that there are two kinds of narcissistic subject, one neurotic, the other criminal. For Kofman, this omission has served two related purposes. It has averted the danger of a maternal-cultural origin of life, which remains inaccessible to the sons and makes them

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irrevocably mortal (and, we could add, turns them into petty imitators of their mother even if they inaugurate their own genetic logic). According to Kofman, Freud's neglect has also blurred the relation between psychoanalytic method and judicial interrogation, as well as the difference between their respective speaking subjects. As methods, both psychoanalysis and judicial inquiry attempt to discover the dissimulated and inaccessible material of a secret. This secret is hidden from the neurotic subject and he or she will eagerly collaborate with the analytical method in order to bring about its disclosure. The criminal subject, on the other hand, knows his or her secret or crime, and cunningly endeavors to hide it in silence or in the construction of an alibi.

2. «Notcatholic» Case Stories and their «Phantom Pains»

In her *Portrait de Jacques Derrida en Jeune Saint Juif*, Cixous suggests that the genetic logic of autobiography in terms of criminality presents us with a kind of «notcatholic» case story. As we shall see, the manifest content of this case story is not only psychic, but also cultural. It represents what the subject makes at a specific moment out of his own life by giving it a descriptive form. In contrast to the dreamer in psychoanalytic theory, who shapes the manifest content of his dream into a story without understanding its manifold meanings, the autobiographical subject does seem to know all the possible meanings that his life expresses at a certain moment. He also knows, however, that not all of these are speakable and that this unspeakability is the origin of his writing. Hélène Cixous quotes a sentence from Derrida's *Circonfession* – «[M]a mère ne fut pas une sainte, pas catholique en tout cas (my mother was not a saint, not catholic in any case)» – and her analysis works remarkably close on its manifest content:

En-tout-cas-pas-catholique [...]. Juif peut-être pas vraiment ni absolument. Mais en tout cas pas-catholique jamais catholique et toujours un peu pascatholique. Et quoi de plus manifeste? C'est un cas pascatholique. (In-any-case-not-catholic[...]. Jewish maybe not really nor absolutely. But in any case non-catholic never catholic and always a little not-Catholic. And what could be more manifest? This is a notcatholic case [story]).

10 In his *Traumdeutung*, Freud introduces the notion of the manifest content of the dream, which the dreamer shapes into a story without knowing all its meanings. In a wider sense, the manifest content means every verbal production, from fantasy to literary works, which one wants to interpret according to the analytical method. Sigmund Freud: *Die Traumdeutung*. In: Gesammelte Werke, II–III. London 1942, pp. 283–284.
13 Ibid.
The notcatholic case story that Cixous reconstructs from Derrida’s sentence, is the story of his notcatholic mother. Cixous’ analysis attends to the interplay between its manifest and categorical descriptiveness (in-any-case, never, always not catholic) and the hidden formulation of a highly uncertain and improperly punctuated description of both son and mother (Jewish maybe not really nor absolutely). It also attends, however, to the rather comical effects produced by Derrida’s autobiographical appropriation of the mother, which fails to designate the name of the ethnos of both mother and son while simultaneously pointing to a maternal logic of cultural difference in terms of the ambiguity and counter-contamination of the forms of life (such as the seriously notcatholic, yet slightly comical sainthood of both Jewish mother and son).

Such origins of individual life and life in general are maternal. Cixous talks about Derrida’s mother in both an individual and a generic sense: «[...] sa mère sans pareille, et la mère [...]» (his incomparable mother, and the mother),14 describing her as an Ursache or an originary cause, a first thing of (his) life and of (his) writing. We should note that, in this philosophical context, the mother is usually said to be a thing or Sache. She is reified so that philosophy’s quest for living thought can constitute itself by leaving her behind. In his Spectres de Marx, Derrida associates the philosophical truth of the logic of inheritance and generations with just such a conscious and willful «forgetting of the maternal.»15 It seems that autobiography, as a kind of spectropoetics of the mother, has more difficulty in reifying her, and that it represents a parody of the philosophical logic of inheritance and generations as well as an alternative truth to this. Autobiography, in terms of its notcatholic paradigm, can never assimilate the mother’s spectral inheritance (Jewish maybe not really nor absolutely) so completely that the maternal can be forgotten. Nor can the son make this powerful and awful spirit of life live within himself.16 He knows that he can only imitate his maternal specter on paper and in a petty way, inscribing grammatical and narrative obstacles to appropriation and pointing to origins of an uncertain and ambiguous nature. The gesture by which he grammatically appropriates the specter («ma mère ne fut pas une sainte, pas catholique en tout cas»), indicates simultaneously and repeatedly the confusion

14 Ibid., p. 38.
16 Derrida suggests that «the dividing line [between a parody or the truth of the logic of inheritance] passes between a mechanical reproduction of the specter and an appropriation that is so alive, so interiorizing, so assimilating of the inheritance and of the <spirits of the past> that it is none other than the life of forgetting, life as forgetting itself. And the forgetting of the maternal in order to make the spirit live in oneself. These are Marx’s words.» (ibid.)
that is caused by the signifier *pas*: a confusion about one’s own threshold and movements as well as about orders of priority and precedence, one involving errors and places of danger that cannot be left behind or passed easily. The maternal-cultural and inaccessible origin of life that Freud’s conception of femininity averted exists as one such dangerous place or *mauvais pas*, as does the maternal cause and *Ursache* of life that will not be reified by philosophical thought.

For Hélène Cixous, the not-Catholic Jewish-Algerian-French scene of autobiography is haunted by a maternal inheritance of an uncertain and ambiguous logic. It further responds to an originary «phantom pain» of the *ethnos*. This pain circumscribes the possibilities of filial self- and life-fashioning, both for sons like Jacques Derrida and for daughters like herself but, as we shall see, in different ways:

*Si je n’étais pas *juive* me dis-je, je me demande comment, avec quelle espèce de timidité, j’oserais en parler, de cette blessure originaire, de cette douleur fantôme et de la *Circumcision* qui s’ensuit. Mais *si j’étais juive* me dis-je, ce serait autrement effrayant et inquiétant. Mais qu’est-ce que ça veut dire *juive*? ou *juif*? Ce mot qui traverse toute sa vie et toute ma vie, toute son œuvre et maintenant ce livre [...] (If I weren’t Jewish I said to myself, I asked myself how, with what kind of timidity, I would dare to speak of it, of this originary wound, of this phantom pain and of the *Circumcision* ensuing from it. But if I were Jewish I said to myself, that would be differently disconcerting and troubling. But what does *Jewish* [female] or *Jewish* [male] mean? This word that crosses his entire life and my entire life, his entire work and now this book...).*17

Cixous describes the «circumcision» of Derrida’s life and writing and her own with the whole range of meanings that ambiguity signifies:18 timidity, hesitations, doubts, irresoluteness, hybridity, wavering, and inaccessibility. The Jewishness of the speaking self is negated and affirmed, but only in the conditional form. Its descriptive form is a «phantom pain», in which circumcision originates, it seems, as a fashioning of the inaccessible. This circumcision is inseparable from the need to question the descriptive value of the signifier of Jewishness («But what does it want to say *Jewish*?») and to inscribe sexual difference into the cultural poetics of French self- and life-fashioning («*juive*? *juif*?»). Cixous complicates the interplay between grammatical, sexual and cultural forms of difference further by staging an inaugural Algerian mirror scene between Derrida’s life and writing and her own:

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17 Hélène Cixous: *Portraits* (note 1). The quotation is from the inlet that accompanies the book. It responds to Derrida’s imitation and displacement of Rousseau’s description of himself as being happy in spite of himself: «Fus-je heureux? Non, je goûtaï le plaisir» [Was I happy? No, I tasted the pleasure], which appears with Derrida as: «Fus-je *juif*? Non je goûtaï le plaisir» [Was I Jewish? No I tasted the pleasure].

18 We should note that the Latin prefixes «circum-» and «amb-» can both refer to meanings of uncertainty and inaccessibility.
Circumcision, the originary phantom pain of male Jewish life and fiction, marks a reality of human, cultural, and sexual difference, in which the self appears as «inseparable from its own inaugural separation» in both a psychic and a physical sense. But psyches and bodies are not only made and wounded on the genital level. They are also made in terms of very precise geopolitical and historical locations, such as, for both Derrida and Cixous, Algeria 1940. Algeria, their shared birthplace, is a mirror scene of different kinds of inaccessibility: it was always already lost because of colonialism and because, in 1940, of its occupation by Vichy France, which made it inaccessible to them both as French and as Jews. Cixous recalls elsewhere that, in this context, the word Jewish itself became unspeakable: «C’est un Jo», her mother would say about someone of her people, reducing the ethnic signifier to its initial and thereby marking its historical condition of unspeakability.

Within this original scene of geopolitical and historical inaccessibility, Derrida’s psychic and physical wound of circumcision blisters into an ethnic wound for which Cixous invents the amazing signifier «inséparable». Resisting translation, this signifier expresses a precise, yet delirious constellation of a psychically, historically, geopolitically, and ethnically divided origin from which the self is inseparable. The materiality of the French signifier confounds the Hebrew word for the Spanish (Sephardic) Jew and for oriental Jewishness (as separate from occidental) with the Arab native of Algeria. It literalizes and historicizes the Jewish-Algerian-French scene of autobiography as a scene that is haunted by errors, confusions, counter-contaminations, and phantasms of identification. «[…] Algérie, notre lot continu, histoire riche en tourmentsonges, en batailles entre régiments de phantasmes identificatoires […] (Algeria, our continuous lot, a history [or a story] full of false [both falsified and falsifying] torments, of combats between regiments of identificatory fantasies […]»

Cixous says about her and Derrida’s native territory, describing it as a historical and narrative site of origin that continues to stage false torments as well as battles between different orders of phantasmatic identification.

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19 Hélène Cixous: Portrait (note 1), inlet.
20 Ibid., p. 107.
In an earlier book on her childhood in Algeria, *Les rêveries de la femme sauvage*, Cixous thinks of herself in terms of an inseparable separation from this native territory, which prescribes an unlivable relationship to her own self: «Moi, pensais-je, je suis inséparable. C’est une relation invivable avec soi-même. (I am, I thought, inseparable. This is an unlivable relation to oneself).»

The delirious signifier that she invents for herself inscribes her into a further mirror scene with her male counterpart Jacques Derrida («inséparable» / «inséparable»). She thinks of herself as being inseparable from the native Arab who does not care for her girlish desire to enter his native territory as her birthplace. Her originary relationship to herself is unlivable because it entails and is curtailed by relations to others and to territory that are circumscribed by ethnic regulations and colonial and fascist forms of geo- and biopolitics. Jewish-Algerian-French autobiography or autofiction counters by inventing the delirious terms of self- and life-fashioning that respond to such an origin: «inséparable» for Jacques Derrida and «inséparable» for Hélène Cixous. As terms of a Jewish-Algerian-French poetics of both sexual and cultural difference, Cixous’ signifiers also seem to inaugurate a queer kind of retributive justice, which literally confounds the genital order of the sexes by making typographical errors. To Derrida’s psychic and physical wound of circumcision, Cixous applies an additional and somewhat feminizing letter: the mute «h» which gives breath to the occlusive consonant «p». Her own selfhood appears as an originally circumcised site of desire, the site of an incision by which a letter has been effaced.

3. A Spectropoetics of the Mother

On a theoretical level, Hélène Cixous’ latest works seem to establish links between highly fashionable interests and concepts from different fields of contemporary analysis. I shall only briefly allude to these issues in a summary fashion, neither elaborating on their enormous complexities, nor on their contradictions. I do want to suggest, however, that they can inform our reading of Cixous’ poetics of Jewish-Algerian-French self- and life-fashioning in significant ways, and that we can read her recent serial exploration of autobiography in terms of both sexual and cultural difference as a seminal contribution to their poetical reformulation. Indeed, these interests and concepts refer to a cluster of related problems, which we have already encountered in the course of our reading: problems of unspeakability and haunting within the logic of the *ethnos*, the maternal-cultural origin of individual life and life in general, and the delirious configuration of selfhood under the socio- and geopolitical terms of colonialism.

Above all, the following theoretical concerns can serve to substantiate our reading of Cixous' poetics of autobiography, which, as I suggest, allows us, in turn, to grasp their relatedness: the psychoanalytic concept of trans-generational haunting, as a form of family narrative where, according to Nicolas Abraham, «what haunts are [...] the gaps left within us by the secrets of others»; the feminist interest in the relationship between the questions of mothering, autobiography, and the woman writer in terms of what Barbara Johnson calls «a theory of autobiography as monstrosity»; Derrida's philosophical concept of a «spectropoetics», which addresses the social mode of haunting that originates in the logic of inheritance and generations; the cultural analysis of the colonial situation, from Frantz Fanon to Homi Bhabha, where everyday life exhibits a «constellation of delirium» that originates in an initial trauma of military oppression and defines both individual consciousness and social life; and finally, the post-colonial and feminist critique of the exclusivist politics of identity that was shaped originally, as Gayatri Spivak has suggested, by linking the autobiographical and the ethnographical ventures, and subsequently by separating the issues of sexual reproduction (in terms of family and the female),


24 Jacques Derrida: Spectres (note 15). According to Derrida, the social mode of haunting refers to a cultural-political-economic reality that originates in the logic of inheritance and generations and necessitates a «new thinking of borders [and] new experience of the house, the home, the economy» (ibid., pp.101–108, p. 174. Obviously, Derrida works here with the original meaning of economy as the law of the oikos or household).

25 Frantz Fanon: Peau Noire. Masques Blancs. Paris 1952 (here quoted from the English translation: Black Skin White Masks. New York 1967). Fanon uses the older psychiatric term of a «manicheism delirium» in order to describe a constellation of delirium that affects both the black and the white man and traps them in a destructive mechanism of phantasmatic counter-identifications (p. 183). In his foreword to the renewed publication of Fanon's text by Pluto Press (London and Sydney 1987), Homi Bhabha offers a succinct reading of the colonial constellation of delirium and its doubling, displacing, and reversible imagery of being in at least two places at once.

26 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: «Questions of Multi-culturalism». In: Hecate: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Women's Liberation, Vol. 12, No. 1/2, 1986 (here quoted from: The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Ed. by Sarah Harasym, London and New York 1990, pp. 59–66). Spivak suggests here, that «if one looks at the history of post-Enlightenment theory, the major problem has been the problem of autobiography. » She remarks that, within the history of colonial relations, the life stories of native informants have been «unquestioningly treated as the objective evidence for the founding of so-called sciences like ethnography», while the theoretical problems of autobiographical selfhood have been seen as exclusively related to the dominant and knowing selves of the colonizing nations.
social subject-production (in terms of race and the male), artistic soul-making (in terms of autobiographical authorship), and geopolitical world-making (in terms of the history and politics of locations and territories).²⁷

At first glance, it might seem incredible to suggest that we can find all of these disparate theoretical interests and concepts within the narrow confines of one person’s autobiographical exploration. If, however, we take into consideration that, at their heart, there is an irresolvable conflict between the private and the public realm as well as a history of crimes or a criminal condition of the making of selves and lives, then autobiography, as Hélène Cixous redefines it, seems especially apt to address this cluster of problems. Her series of autobiographical explorations presents itself, I want to suggest, as a «spectropoetics of the mother», in which all of the issues enumerated above collide and clash within the confines of the daughter’s life- and self-fashioning. At the very beginning of this series, Cixous herself discovers with surprise, that the contestatory form²⁸ of her own writing has been intimated to her by the combat scene of her mother’s life:

[...] très tôt dans l’aventure [...] j’ai découvert que ce serait un combat ce livre contre lui-même et plus précisément ce qui s’annonçait, à ma surprise, c’est un combat de ma mère contre ma mère, je précis: de maman contre ma mère, et plus précisément encore un combat mené dans ma mère même et sur toute l’étendue de la terre – la terre qui est elle – entre maman, ma mère, Eve, notre mère, Eva Klein, la fiancée de mon père, et Eve Cixous, la sage-femme [...] ([... very early in this adventure [...]], I discovered that this book would be a combat against itself and what announced itself more precisely, is a combat of my mother against my mother. I specify: of mommy against my mother, and still more precisely a combat fought in my mother herself and extending throughout the world – the earth that she is – between mommy, my mother, Eve, our mother, Eva Klein, my father’s fiancée, and Eve Cixous, the midwife [...])²⁹

This violently self-contradictory form of autobiography is constituted by a self-contradictory, multiple, fragmented, and all-extensive mother who generates the terms of her daughter’s struggle with the raw and dissimulated materials of her own life and writing. Proclaimed as the original figure of literature, this mother is said to be real as well as imaginary, the object of a singular desire as well as of a plural one, an inimitable woman with her own


²⁸ In her work on autobiographical manifestos, Sidonie Smith suggests reading Hélène Cixous’ feminist writings of the 1970s as autobiographical manifestos of contestatory and self-consciously political acts rather than as aesthetic ones. Sidonie Smith: Subjectivity, Identity and the Body. Indiana University Press 1993, pp. 154–182.

²⁹ Hélène Cixous: Osnabrück (note 1), pp. 15–16.
unique life story and simultaneously the female origin of any life. The combat that takes place within herself and among her figurations announces itself «precisely» both in and as her daughter’s autobiographical adventure. The daughter’s story, in return, is very specific about the fronts on which her mother’s combat is being fought: namely, those of temporality, nomination, objectification, location, identification, and position. More specifically, it shows how this maternal combat is fought within three fields of conflict in her daughter’s book: that of a psychic conflict between the intimate term of endearment «mommy» and the narrative term of appropriation «my mother», that of a conflict between different forms of motherhood or mothering, such as mommy’s and Eve’s ways of mothering or Eve Cixous’ midwifery, and that of the historical, geopolitical and social tensions between Eve in the Garden of Eden, unmarried Eva Klein from Nazi-Germany, and the widow Eve Cixous, who ran a birth clinic in Algeria until she was expelled to France in 1971. We should note that, in an earlier essay on the relation between literature and criminality, Hélène Cixous had already suggested a conspiratorial link between the non-confessional logic of biofiction and her own mother’s professional logic of biopolitics: «Une sage-femme expérimentée avait dit à ma mère la sage-femme: «Si on vous accuse d’avortement, n’avouez jamais…»» (An experienced midwife had said to my mother the midwife: «Should you ever be accused of abortion, never confess…»).³⁰

At the start of her recent series of autobiographical works, Cixous also gives descriptive form to the way in which her own life and writing have always been inseparable from an initial and initiating separation from her mother. This form introduces us to a different scene of autobiographical combat, the dissimulated and almost comical scene of a combat between daughter and mother themselves:

[...] j’ai toujours vécu accompagnée d’une mère étrangère à mes désirs si dissociée de mes événements si associée à mes mouvements et qui toujours m’a conduite à me taire un peu et peut-être donc à écrire c’est-à-dire à parler sans bruit sans son, pour que je m’adresse à elle sans qu’elle m’entende et qu’elle m’entende de dos [...] on n’a jamais vu une telle interpénétration de personnes si résolument séparées (I have always lived in the company of a mother estranged from my desires so dissociated from my events so associated with my movements and who has always led me to silence myself a bit and thus maybe to write that is to talk without noise without sound, so that I address myself to her without her hearing me and so that she hears me from behind her back [...] One has never seen such an interpenetration of people who are so resolutely separated).³¹

In this combat scene, the mother appears at the origin of the genetic logic of literature because she instructs, from within her own logic, her daughter’s silence and thus inaugurates her daughter’s silent expression of speech and

³¹ Hélène Cixous: Osnabrück (note 1), p. 47.
self as an obstinate poetry of backtalk to the mother. Not surprisingly, this mother does not confess to what her daughter's backtalk has to say about herself and she refuses to collaborate with her daughter's preparatory fieldwork and insistent inquiries into the mysteries and unspeakables of her own life story. «[T]u imagines et je suis simple [...] (You imagine and I am simple [...]»,

she says to her daughter, mimicking the relation between the ethnographer and the native subject of ethnographical inquiries. Almost in spite of herself, however, she subsequently initiates her daughter's counter- or meta-ethnographical understanding that no form of life is simple or straightforward: «[...] tout n'existe que commençant coupé, divisé, opposé par soi-même [...] (nothing exists without beginning cut, divided, opposed by itself)». The daughter's understanding of life as self-contradictory does not appease her mother's suspicion of what she, the daughter, is doing, however. She discredits her daughter's professional adventure and public output as a falsification of her own life, giving voice to a kind of native backtalk to the ethnographical inquiry: «Et d'ailleurs même de mon vivant tes livres sont de la fantaisie. Tout est falsification et fantaisie. (And even while I live your books are fantasy. Everything is falsification and fantasy).»

More specifically, the mother is troubled by the performative aspect of her daughter's spectropoetical backtalk about unspeakable things, and she suggests some serious revisions or revocations: «[Tu as] toujours été [...] un acteur sur papier, [...] en silence. [Une] personne qui se laiss[e] emporter par cette possibilité de dire les choses qu'il ne faut pas dire, de les exprimer avec beaucoup de feu, tu peux déduire la moitié. (You have always been an actor on paper, in silence. A person who lets herself be carried away by this possibility of saying the things that should not be said, of expressing them with a lot of fire, you can take half of it away).»

Carried away by the possibility of saying precisely the things that should not be said, the daughter inquires into what has been repressed of her mother's family story, such as the story about great-uncle Benjamin, the «Phantom Jew» nobody ever really talks about. In the following conversation, for example, the mother alludes somewhat evasively to Benjamin's story, while the daughter insists on its precise rendering, chasing her mother's furtive language:

[T]oute cette histoire de Benjamin, – que la famille avait chassé, dis-je, – le mot chassé on ne l'a jamais dit, dit ma mère, personne n'aurait pu vouloir chasser Benjamin le plus jeune

32 Hélène Cixous: Benjamin (note 1), p. 50.
33 Ibid., p. 92.
34 Ibid., p. 150.
35 Ibid., p. 239.
36 Ibid., p. 142.
et le plus petit de la famille - chassé, dis-je, j'insistais, je pourchassais ma mère [...] je chassais et pourchassais les effacements et les effacés, brusquement j'avais besoin de Benjamin et de cette histoire dont on ne parle jamais car c'est justement l'histoire dont on ne parle pas qui est la clé de l'histoire qu'on raconte. (The entire story of Benjamin — who was chased off by the family I said — the word chased off we never said, said my mother, nobody could have wanted to chase off Benjamin the youngest and the smallest of the family — chased off, I insisted, I chased my mother [...] I chased the effacements and the effaced, suddenly I needed Benjamin and this story nobody ever talks about because it is just the story one does not talk about which is the key to the story one tells).  

By talking back to her mother, the daughter responds to her need to speak out and act upon what is unspeakable in her mother's story, such as the eerie complicity in effacing the effaced, which «nobody could have wanted», but in which everybody collaborated nonetheless. In Cixous' spectropoetics of the mother, the unspeakable content of her mother's family story becomes the key to a form of autobiographical storytelling that insists upon reinscribing precisely that, which has been cut out, silenced or effaced.  

Within the combat scenes of Cixous' spectropoetics, a mutual monstrosity between daughter and mother becomes visible. In a conversation with her brother about their mother («the unbreakable dinosaur»), the daughter realizes both the almost unfathomable distance from her giant and prehistoric mother-beast and the monstrosity of her own selfhood in relation to her mother: «[Elle] est un dinosaure incassable, dit mon frère. Des centaines de millions d’années plus tard je naiss. Je suis son monstre. ([She] is an unbreakable dinosaur, my brother says. Hundreds of millions of years later I am born. I am her monster)». And in a poetic prologue about her first days at school and the initial loss of her mother, Cixous describes herself as having been haunted by a monstrous maternal fury, which she could only appease by writing, first by making «paper-mommies» and later «paper-women»:

J’étais hantée. J’avais dans le cœur ce domaine géant et inhabité dont j’étais l’esclave et auquel m’attachait une fureur appelée maman. Avec mes pages de papier me frotter la figure, avec mes mamans de papier. Première drogue. Plus tard [...] les petites femmes de papier inestimables qui me venaient aux doigts à volonté. (I was haunted. In my heart I had this giant and inhabited domain in which I was the slave and to which I was attached by a fury called mommy. With my pages of paper to wipe my face, with my paper-mommies. First drug. Later [...] inestimable little paper-women who came to my fingers voluntarily).  

In her recent spectropoetics of the mother, Cixous leaves these later paper-women to return to her paper-mommy and to the original figure of her inseparable separation and paraprofessional activity. This return seems to raise both professional and psychic doubts about the form of self- and life-
fashioning it implies. «Ça ne va pas du tout, ce livre qui suit ma mère comme un chien (this doesn’t work at all, this book that follows my mother like a dog)»,\(^{40}\) Cixous worries in the middle of her foray into the mother’s domain. Her own work of fidelity and self-figuration is seen in terms of a metamorphosis from its human into an animal condition. This time, however, the beast, compared to the dinosaur above, appears to be rather domesticated, signifying not the mother but the daughter herself. As she ventures into the mother’s domain, she discovers a mutual unknown of unequal terms between her mother and herself: «Mais parlant d’Eve puisque je suis d’elle une part d’elle partie d’elle, […] elle ne peut se concevoir que détachée et maître […], sans doute et sans savoir comment je parle de moi, de cette part-Eve de moi qui me reste inconnue […] (But talking about Eve because I am of her a part of her parted from her, […] she cannot think of herself as other than detached and master […], without doubt and without knowing how I talk about myself, about this part-Eve of myself who remains unknown to me […]).»\(^{41}\)

Again, this mutual psychic inaccessibility is figured in terms of both sexual and cultural difference. In an amazing counter-imagery to Plato’s myth of the cave (hystera) – which Luce Irigaray has described as the inaugural scene of the male theatre of representation, where the maternal is expropriated and silenced\(^{42}\) –, Cixous describes the inaugural scene of her spectropoetics as the cave for her mother’s lost possessions and her «strange citations»: «Jusqu’à hier je ne l’ai jamais fait, d’être cette cave sur laquelle maman grave ses citations étrangères, et dépose par les noms propres les restes du charme à jamais perdu de cet âge allemand (Until yesterday I never did this, being this cave on which my mother engraves her strange citations, and deposits with proper names the remnants of the charm, forever lost, of that German age).»\(^{43}\) The mother’s sudden return to a scene of representation, in which both the real and the fictive are (re)presented, allows the forgotten, dispossessed, inaccessible, or unspeakable of that mother’s cultural inheritance to return in her daughter’s story: «Chaque fois que ma mère l’être-allemande fait retour aussitôt l’être-juive fait retour. Est-elle allemande la voilà juive. Un monde ne resurgit pas des fonds sans l’autre. (Every time my mother the German-being comes back, the Jewish-being

\(^{40}\) Ibid., p. 151.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., p. 99.


\(^{43}\) Hélène Cixous: *Osnabrück* (note 1), p. 131.
comes back at the same time. Is she German there she is Jewish. One world
does not resurge from the depths without the other.)»

In Cixous’ latest book exploring a spectropoetics of the mother, she re-
fects on her mother’s and aunt’s recent return to their native town, Osnab-
rück, following an invitation by the town’s female mayor. In the context of
this «real» return, none of the retributive justice of her daughter’s story
actually occurs. Furthermore, the logic of Plato’s theatre of representation
seems strangely re-effected, this time by a woman of politics who, not un-
like Irigaray’s Plato, probably secretly wished to reassure her own anxieties
of historical origin. Hélène Cixous records her mother’s account of the trip
to Osnabrück, which tells of the ghostly reaffirmation of the protagonists’
dispossession: «Nous nous sommes retrouvées perdues et remplacées et
changées en fantômes [...] on nous a invitées au théâtre de notre mise à
l’ombre. (We found ourselves lost again and replaced and changed into
phantoms [...] they invited us to the theatre of our casting as shadows).»

If we follow Cixous’ latest work, the tragedy of this theatre of ghostly
(self)representation exists in its circular logic, whereby the condemnations,
under which the protagonists find themselves, turn into repudiations that
they themselves perform. Thus, the replaced mother talks about the Russian
replacement-Jews» who were brought to the Osnabrück synagogue in or-
der to assure a minyan:

On faisait venir des Russes par force mais ils savaient quand-même qu’ils étaient des Juifs.
On nous a invitées à la cérémonie de notre remplacement. Nous nous sommes vues rem-
placées par des Russes qui ne connaissent rien à rien. Les Russes jouaient nos rôles de
synagogue. (They brought Russians, by force, but these knew nevertheless that they were
Jews. They invited us to the ceremony of our replacement. We watched ourselves be re-
placed by Russians who know nothing at all. The Russians played our parts in the syna-
gogue).

As a part of her, her mother parted from her, the daughter inquires into the
epistemological and ontological logic of this account. «Mais qu’est-ce que
ça veut dire ce savoir-là et cet être-là pensais-je, qui sait [...] (But what does
it want to say this knowledge and this being-there I thought, who knows
 [...]»? She questions, too, the apparent certainty of her mother’s and aunt’s
self-representation and their representation of the Russian Jews as their
other, somewhat less Jewish counterparts in Osnabrück’s theatre of Jewish
representation. She endeavors almost feverishly to unfold the delirious
constellation behind her mother’s and aunt’s certainty regarding what they
know about themselves and what they are:

44 Hélène Cixous, Benjamin (note 1), p. 199.
46 Ibid., p. 153.
In this context, Cixous remembers and cites a phrase of uncertain origin, which brings us back to Michel de Montaigne and the marrano-paradigm of autobiographical writing: «[...] aucun Juif n'a su ni ne saura jamais rien de certain il me semble avoir lu ça au plafond de la librairie de Montaigne mais je n'en suis pas certaine [...] (no Jew knew nor will ever know anything for certain it seems like I have read this on the ceiling of Montaigne’s library but I am not certain about it [...]».

Some pages later, however, this borrowed sentence about the uncertainty of Jewish (self)knowledge reappears with quite another subject, and not on Montaigne’s library ceiling, but in her mother’s speech about what the German Jews knew about Hitler: «Tu crois qu'on savait? Je vais te dire une chose que ma grand-mère disait toujours: personne n'a jamais su ni ne saura rien de certain [...] (You think we knew? I will tell you one thing that my grandmother always used to say: nobody ever knew nor will know anything for certain [...]».

In this mirror scene of uncertainties, each speaking subject borrows his or her sentences about (self)knowledge from a different domain of inaccessibility: Hélène Cixous from the haze of her memory and Michel de Montaigne from the secret logic of his ethnos, Cixous’ mother from her dead grandmother’s talk and the grandmother from the logic of the human, from which Hitler later excluded her offspring.

Parallel to this delirious mirror scene, Cixous remembers her first visit to Michel de Montaigne’s castle near Bordeaux. She thinks of the sentences that are painted on the panels of his library as something that served him to still his anxiety about the uncertainty of his (self)knowledge and his origins: «Contre l’angoisse, la pharmacie idéale [...] En voilà un pensais-je qui tremblait [...] Contre la peur cinquante-sept sentences d’apaisement. Un arsenal. (Against the anxiety, the ideal pharmacy [...] Here is somebody I thought who trembled [...] Against the fear fifty-seven sentences of appeasement. An arsenal).»

Not surprisingly, Cixous views Montaigne’s sentences as the paper-mommies with which he could wipe his face: «En cet arsenal me dis-je ce que l'être humain cache dans un coin, c'est sa mère.
[...] (In this arsenal, I said to myself, that which the human being hides in a corner, is his mother [...]»52 This mirror scene is even more complicated than it originally seems, however, since Cixous discovers her own mother hidden in Montaigne’s borrowed words: «[...] c’est sa mère ou ma mère. Dès que je m’étais retrouvée la première fois dans la Librairie, je l’avais reconnue, c’est ma mère tout craché en latin et en grec, ce sont ses pensées, si elles avaient pu trouver leur traduction équestre et virile. ([...] It is his mother or my mother. From the first time I found myself in the Library, I recognized her, it is my mother all spit in Latin and Greek, these are her thoughts, if they could have found their equestrian and virile translation).»53

In this last spectropoetic scene of autobiographical parentage, Cixous finds herself by recognizing her mother’s thought as the silenced feminine alternative to the classical and masculinized order of language Michel de Montaigne borrowed for his sentences of appeasement. We can find evidence of the hiding of the maternal in the disparate and even contradictory terms of cultural, sexual, linguistic, and poetic difference. The surprisingly appeased self-figuration of the daughter – «I found myself» – exploits from within the fatherly confines of the masculine scene of (self)representation (i.e. in Montaigne’s library) the very terms that enforce this silencing and hiding of the maternal. She spits out these terms in public and thus makes the maternal origin of thought publishable within the spectropoetics of autobiography. Her scene of autobiographical parentage reverses, displaces, and doubles the order of language and speech on which the autobiographical venture has been founded, as well as its cultural, sexual, linguistic, and poetic terms. With Cixous, the private work of autobiography thus becomes a public act on the unspeakable or untranslatable of maternal-cultural inheritance. In her recent spectropoetics, this unspeakable makes itself heard – in all the criminality, monstrosity, and ambiguity of its genetic logic – by borrowing and exploiting the very terms that are meant to enforce its silence. Emerging from this maternal-cultural unspeakable, Cixous’ poetic language carries a violence, a precision, and a comicality that seem to bring it to the very limits of autobiographical speakability as we know it.

52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.