



Lifewriting Annual

Campbell, MM. 2021. Quinn Eades, *all the beginnings: A Queer Autobiography of the Body*. Tantanoola, North Melbourne, Vic., Australia. 2015. 274 pp. *Lifewriting Annual*, 5(1): pp. 1–6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/la.1913>



Open Library of Humanities

**Quinn Eades, *all the beginnings: a queer autobiography of the body*. Tantanoola, North Melbourne, Vic., Australia. 2015. 274 pp.**

Between Mirrors

Marion May Campbell, Deakin University, [marion.campbell@deakin.edu.au](mailto:marion.campbell@deakin.edu.au)

---



*In the beginning there is an end. Don't be afraid: it's your death that is dying. Then: all the beginnings.*

(Cixous 1991 41)

*... this tattooed, birthed and birthing, queer, surgeried, white, lusting, splitting, othered thing, this "meat" [that] thinks...*

(Eades 41)

Just as any body's cells are constantly dying and regenerating, *all the beginnings: a queer autobiography of the body* draws its vitality from the teeming traffic of death, the fertile muck of the abject. Such is the suggestion of the title, sourced in Hélène Cixous' work (1991, 41), out of whose spell this life writing marks off its distinctive poetics of the fragment, drawing an ethics of openness from the mining of abjection. To be sure, this is no chronological memoir, building teleologically to a transformation and consolidation of social identity.

Quite to the contrary: bold, brave, and disturbingly innovative, this work from Melbourne-born, Sydney-raised Quinn Eades, formerly known as Karina Quinn, performs a body reinventing itself: scarified, "surgeried," written into and out of, and endlessly reconfigured through writing. Eades builds their story through a constellation of scenes staging the embodied yet fractured self, the *sujet en procès*, the subject-on-trial and -in-process (Kristeva 1977) from coruscating scintillation to depressive passivity, through *écriture matière* — writing as a material practice. Building on Wittig's refusal of the "feminine" (5–8; 59–60), and in answer to Cixous' *écriture féminine* (1976), Quinn's *écriture matière* becomes the driving trope, turning insides out, working poetically on the material face of language, to present the story of a woman's body in trauma, disarray, illness, and defiant abundance. To the degree that it dares to plumb the depths of these experiences, the writing opens out to bliss, connection and the possibility of transition-to-come. This transition is held just below the narrative horizon, but it can be read throughout the text as latent.

As Johnson (1992), Kaplan (1992) and Gilmore (1995) have argued in their different ways, whether through ethnicity, class, gender and/or LGBTI affiliations, the marginalised have long and variously challenged the autobiographical contract as characterised by earlier theorists as Lejeune (1975) and Olney (1980). From Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography* (1993 [1937]) through to Kincaid's *Autobiography of my Mother* (1996) and Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (2012), major practises of the *out-law genre* (Kaplan 1992) have powered cultural and political resistance through generic tampering and iconoclastic *monstering* (Johnson 1992), quite conscious that this word pertains to showing what is deemed unsightly or obscene under the rules of

the orderly, seemly, and proper. That Quinn's *queer autobiography of the body* is overtly hybrid, mixing as it does cultural theory with the exploration of intimate embodied experience, in no way cools its ardour to register the voices of pain and ugliness, and shame that the mothers and aesthetic police would silence.

The work's generic mix is the formal manifestation of the poetics of the abject:

What if the act of writing the body is a kind of poiesis, an activity of production, from praxis, an activity of action? [...] And in between? In between is life, chora, breath, the sound of your name on my tongue: this corporeal text. (Eades 43)

Quinn's opening celebration of their sumptuous tattoos is soon punctured by intimations of teenaged induction into sexual terror, a piping all the more unnerving for its gradual and oblique revelation, and we begin to read the skin as the scarified palimpsest of self-harm and substance abuse. Yet, countering the intensity with which it details anxiety, shame, and pain, this body writing almost ignites with the joy of successful insemination and conception within a loving lesbian relationship, and the miracle of birthing two boys. For all the searing pain of swollen and lacerated nipples, it also unforgettably celebrates the *jouissance* of breastfeeding, even as it details the external gender-code defiance of the close-cropped head, the docs, and stevedore's shirt unbuttoned on massive, leaking breasts. Later, it takes us into the butcher's shop (Cixous 1993, 8) of radical hysterectomy, and through all of this, the writing from the wounded and endlessly reinscribed body is never just a narcissistic adventure of one. Always the reader is addressed as intimate other, as if born again and again differently in the fold of the writer's ear. But the reader also smells and touches the seepage and emissions: "the smell of the page is of blood and saliva and milk mixed together (the colour like rotten strawberries or the soaked pad at the bottom of your tray of supermarket mince)". We go into 'love as it really is: a fire of tongues, an escape from representation' (Eades 59).

This *écriture matière* registers as a rip through the flesh of time the suicidal bullet fired by John Quinn, returned WWII soldier, poet, and the Eades' grandfather—the trauma that defies representation in cursive time is carried as wound in the textual body. Writing is violence and resistance, just as it is trauma relived: "I came to writing like it would save me, protect me from the fall, not knowing that the caress was actually a push. I was already plummeting" (Eades 82). But it is through writing the wound that Eades discovers what they have denied themselves or even prohibited in channeling the "muse of Plath, and Woolf, and Sexton (Eades 87)"; and that is the propensity for pleasure and joy.

The wager has been to *write the worst*, but surely, along with trauma, writing becomes connective tissue (Eades 62), affirming a collective story: of resisting bodies and intergenerational empowerment—through feminism. After BDSM abuse, after self-harm, chronic suicidal ideation, heroine and alcohol addiction; after cruel surgery and its aftermath, after all the wounds through which “power enters,” there is the exhilaration of becoming other through writing as a practice, paradoxically, of renewal, through this poetics of abjection.

The reader samples strange pleasures in the dynamic evocation of ghastly sounds, smells, and textures: the seepage, expulsion and flows manifest in a shockingly sumptuous palette that we can associate with a Francis Bacon or its writerly counterpart in Jean Genet:

A poetics of the abject looks like this [...] It is pus yellow and blood red and mucus green.

[...]

A poetics of the abject sounds like this: descent. Bubbling. [...] You will have to place your ear next to an open wound to catch it; it is the sound the cells make. It is the peristaltic squish of your bowel. It is the hack inside a gag. It is you.

[...]

A poetics of the abject smells like this: mango skins left in a hot bin, mould, piss, clothes that are worn for weeks and not washed.

[...]

A poetics of the abject tastes like this: fizzing yoghurt [...] It tastes like blood sucked from a slit in your lover’s arm. It tastes like cum. It tastes like going down and refusing to come back up’ (Eades 123).

Throughout these serial synesthetic plunges, the reader’s senses are brought to acute self-recognition with the refrain: *it is you* (Eades 123). And Quinn opens their senses and emotions to being—

not whole. [They] work at acceptance. Ruptures where [they] find strength, and relief, and even, love. Ruptures where [they] learn to stop fearing the leak that is the body, to let what is inside be out; to step, anatomically disordered, remapped, into the next day. (204)

*all the beginnings* produces with almost hallucinatory force a body in queer metamorphosis from trauma, through all the modalities of abjection, towards affirmation.

Woman must write her body, but so must queer, and not-white, and differently-abled all of us who find ourselves wakened one indistinct morning into madness that crept upon us in the night, that has laid itself down underneath layers of viscera so surely that it is indistinguishable from the sanity of the cool evening before. (Eades 38)

Eades slides us subtly here into a realm beyond binaries, whether they oppose sexes or genders, or rationality from madness, into a realm where all can be deconstructed and redeployed through the imagination in flesh—of queer becomings. This *écriture matière* or *material writing* mobilises the casual dormant pun into something radically alive, like through the mirror maze of the “carnival on *Manly pier*” (Eades 37; emphasis added) where identities of the narrator and sister as children dissolve, warp, and undergo magnified metamorphosis—we enter the spaces between the mirrors.

*all the beginnings* takes us into extreme terrain, joyfully breaking the skin of categories, jostling an exhilarating variety of modes, from philosophical reflection, the scientific identification and detailing of bodily states, to exultant prose poetry. As a materialist poetics of abjection *écriture matière* is enlisted to perform these restless metamorphoses, where a few fearless adventurers of the imagination have dared to go—amongst them: Genet, Acker, and Wittig. Quinn’s life writing is as admirable and moving in its poetic inventiveness, its essayist reflection, and storytelling as it is courageous and radically disruptive. *all the beginnings* should dramatically raise the stakes in writing embodied experience, be the domain prose poetry, autobiography, memoir, gender and queer studies or cultural theory. It is also, from the first page to the last, an utterly compelling work of life writing.

---

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

---

## References

Anzaldúa, Gloria E. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Fourth Edition, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012 [1987].

Cixous, Hélène. *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*. Introduction by Susan Rubin Suleiman; edited by Deborah Jenson; translated by Sarah Cornell, Deborah Janson, Ann Liddell, and Susan Sellers. Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1991 [1977].

Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Translated by Keith Cohen & Paula Cohen. *Signs* (Summer 1976): 875–899. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/493306>.

Cixous, Hélène. "The School of the Dead." In *Three Steps on the Ladder to Writing*. Translated by Susan Sellers, 3–53. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

Gilmore, Leigh. "A Signature of Lesbian Autobiography: Lesbian Representation and the Discourse of Autobiography." In *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1995.

Johnson, Barbara. "My Monster /Myself." Review of *Frankenstein, or, the Modern Prometheus* by Mary Shelley, *My Mother/ Myself* by Nancy Friday, and *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* by Dorothy Dinnerstein. *Diacritics* 12 (Summer 1992): 2–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/464674>.

Kaplan, C. "Resisting Autobiography." In *De/Colonising the Subject: the Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, 115–138. Edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1992.

Kincaid, Jamaica. *The Autobiography of My Mother*. New York: Farrar Strauss, 1996.

Kristeva, Julia. "Le sujet en procès." In *Polylogue*, 55-106. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977.

Lejeune, Philippe. *Le Pacte autobiographique*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, Collection Poétique, 1975.

Olney, James, ed. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400856312>.

Wittig, Monique. *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 2007 (1992).

