

Annie Ernaux International Studies, no. 3: The Heirs of Annie Ernaux

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Series editors: Michèle Bacholle and Jacqueline Dougherty.

Volume editors: Beth Kearney and Alexandra Pugh.

We are preparing an edited volume that will explore the multiple legacies of the 2022 Nobel Prize in Literature laureate, Annie Ernaux. In what ways do writers, visual artists, and filmmakers inherit from and reimagine Ernauxian themes, approaches, poetics, and aesthetics?

We are seeking proposals for scholarly chapters as well as non-traditional, creative submissions. All proposals should make clear reference to the elements of Ernaux's work that are being "inherited" and they should study either a single Ernauxian "heir" or multiple "heirs" through a comparative lens. We are interested in chapters focusing on practitioners from across the world, and not only those from anglophone and francophone spheres, although the volume will be published in English.

Contributors are encouraged to adopt a broad view of the notion of "inheritance," which may apply to individuals of a succeeding generation ("vertical" genealogy) as well as those of the same generation ("horizontal" genealogy). Inheritance may, furthermore, be understood as a dialogue between generations for, as Françoise Collin writes (82), inheritance often occurs bilaterally – through relationality and exchange. All contributors should consider how the act of inheritance necessitates a degree of transformation or evolution, shaped by the spatial, temporal, cultural, social, and political differences that distinguish Ernaux from her heirs. In this sense, we envisage inheritance in the terms that Evelyne Ledoux-Beaugrand develops (25), namely as an opening to alterity, difference, and newness. Inheritance need not be understood as a deliberate act, since an heir may unintentionally borrow or rework Ernauxian themes, tropes, and approaches. Ernaux's work has enjoyed a global reception and impacted the ways readers across the globe think about art, society, politics, gender, the body and more; it is therefore inevitable that her contributions have both directly and indirectly influenced other practitioners. Furthermore, inheritance need not imply agreement with or praise of Ernaux's work. What, for instance, does it mean to be the bearer of a troublesome, difficult, or unwanted inheritance? Is it possible to work against the process of inheritance? To again cite Collin, "filiation is the art of holding onto a thread and breaking a thread" (83). Similarly, Ledoux-Beaugrand (25) writes that "an inheriting posture" involves a "process of sorting" characterised by both continuity and rupture. Finally, we invite contributors to engage not only with "successful" or reparative forms of inheritance, but to explore "unsuccessful," oppositional, and even superficial engagements with Ernaux's legacy.

The following thematic axes are four among many possible approaches to this topic, and they provide only a few potential starting points for responses to this call for proposals. Please let us know if your contribution fits within one of these themes, or whether you would like to propose another.

BETRAYING AND DEFENDING ORIGINS

“Ernaux has become a critical observer of socio-economic structures and an embodiment of the complexity of cultural capital,” write Élise Hugueny-Léger and Fabien Arribert-Narce. In her role as observer of class structures and sociocultural dynamics, Ernaux also examines her own positionality. Raised by working-class parents who made sacrifices to send their daughter to university, Ernaux at times frames her own social mobility as a “betrayal” of her origins. Yet through the political force of her writing, as well as her concrete interventions into France’s political sphere, Ernaux regularly acts in solidarity with a variety of working-class groups. This fidelity, rather than betrayal, was powerfully evoked in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, when she spoke words that she had written in her diary over sixty years earlier: “I write to avenge my people.”

This notion resonates in the work of multiple authors writing today. Perhaps the most well-known example is Édouard Louis, whose texts offer intimate portrayals of his parents and the multiple forms of violence that he observed and experienced throughout his working-class childhood. Yet the Ernauxian trope of defecting from, betraying, or defending one’s origins extends well beyond the work of Louis. It is discernible, for instance, in narratives that portray a trajectory from the banlieues of France towards its urban “centres,” including Nesrine Slaoui’s *Illégitimes* (2021) [*Illegitimates*] and Fatima Daas’s *La Petite dernière* (2020) [*The Last One* (2021)]. The trope is also present in texts about immigration to France, such as Kaoutar Harchi’s *Comme nous existons* (2021) [*As We Exist* (2023)]. This aspect of Ernaux’s legacy is further observable in the ways that authors critically experiment with the French language while attempting to do “justice” to their origins, as Harchi argues in *Je n’ai qu’une langue et ce n’est pas la mienne* in relation to the work of Kateb Yacine, Assia Djebar, Rachid Boudjedra, Kamel Daoud, and Boualem Sansal. The language of popular and working-class cultures is also brought to life in the fiction of Virginie Despentes: as Martina Stemberger writes, Despentes incorporates a popular vernacular through slang, verlan, anglicisms, and hybridity.

DISCLOSING BODILY EXPERIENCE

Embodied experience has been a core focus of Ernaux’s writing since her first publication, the novel *Les Armoires vides* (1974) [*Cleaned Out* (1990)], which portrays the illegal abortion of its young protagonist. This focus on the body reappears in recent texts, such as *Le Jeune homme* (2022) [*The Young Man* (2023)], in which Ernaux describes a romance that she had with a student thirty years her junior. Across her career, then, a major focus for Ernaux has been the body, which she represents as a site of pleasure, violence, shame, illness, and class struggle and which bears the imprint of gendered, classist, and ageist hierarchies.

The disclosure of bodily experience is an increasingly dominant trend in global literature, and Ernaux’s work in this space has been particularly influential. In part, this is because she interrogates embodied experience – that of women, in particular – in ways that resist convention. When *Passion Simple* (1992) [*Simple Passion* (2021)] was first published, even feminists disapproved of the work, perceiving a lack of female agency as the protagonist succumbed to her desire for a

man. And yet, this text has served as inspiration for contemporary women authors such as Liliane Fishman who, in *Acts of Service* (2022), also explores submission and female desire.

Ernaux's transgressive approach [footnote 1] to disclosing bodily experience often serves to highlight gender inequalities, most famously in *L'Événement* (2000) [*Happening* (2019)], which emphasises the dangers of criminalising abortion. This is also true of texts such as *La Femme gelée* (1981) [*A Frozen Woman* (1996)] and *Les Années* (2008) [*The Years* (2018)], in which Ernaux critically addresses the socio-culturally entrenched association between femininity, domesticity, motherhood, and wifedom. How do contemporary writers, visual artists, and filmmakers adopt and adapt these themes? How are embodied experiences narrated today, and does this extend, depart from, or reimagine Ernaux's legacy?

WRITING LIFE

Critics and scholars have described Ernaux's work as autobiographical, autoethnographic, and autofictional, yet Ernaux prefers the term "autosociobiography;" for her, this term reflects a sustained interest in the relationship between the self and wider socio-historical realities (Ernaux, *L'Écriture comme un couteau* 41 and Ernaux in Rérolle). How have Ernaux's heirs negotiated the distinctions between, and hybridity of, these forms of writing? How might "autosociobiography" relate to Deborah Levy's notion of "living autobiography," for example – a form of life writing that is open, evolving, and unresolved? [footnote 2] Ernaux resists the popular term autofiction, sensing that it is applied misogynistically to denote a supposedly lesser "feminine genre, with a narcissistic, trashy, sentimental side to it" (Ernaux in Rérolle). To what extent do Ernaux's heirs embrace, reject, or problematise other categories and genres in their approach to writing life?

Ernaux consistently emphasises the truth value of her work. Both within her narratives and in media interviews, she stresses her work's proximity to life. Her texts frequently make use of personal diary entries, and she writes in *Happening* of her desire to use the autobiographical text to "physically bond" with images from her past (19). Ernaux also experiments with the diary form, notably in her "journaux extimes" ("extimate" diaries or diaries of/from the outside) [footnote 3], an approach that Lauren Elkin appears to inherit in her "diary of a year on the bus" titled *No. 91/92*. Moreover, in writing life, Ernaux uses language that is functional, spare, and unadorned – a style she refers to as "flat writing" (Ernaux, *La Place* 24). The heirs of Ernaux's "flat" prose might include Constance Debré and Colombe Schneck, whose life writing tends towards frankness and concision. Yet the simplicity of Ernaux's prose is deceptive, since she simultaneously broaches powerful societal taboos – from abortion to ageing, illness, and female desire. Could writers like Rachel Cusk, Chris Kraus, or Goliarda Sapienza be understood to inherit Ernaux's interest in the transgressive expression of intimate experience? And to what extent do these authors go beyond the self in their writing, to express a more "transpersonal" truth?

CROSSING MEDIA

Ernaux's corpus encompasses multiple media: while she is known principally for her writing, she has co-produced a film, *Les Années Super 8* (2022) [*The Super 8 Years*] and multiple works of "photobiography," including the co-authored *L'Usage de la photo* (2005) [*The Use of Photography* (2024)] and a newly illustrated, collaborative edition of *L'Autre fille* (2023) [*The Other Girl* (2025)]. In works such as *The Years*, Ernaux also describes photographs in prose, rather than reproducing them as images. This interest in text-image hybridity can be traced in the work of many other con-

temporary practitioners, such as W.G. Sebald, Sophie Calle, Roland Barthes, and Hervé Guibert [footnote 4]. Although Louis is often understood as an “heir” of Ernaux for his intimate narratives of class mobility and social violence, his practice of using photographic images and collaborating on stage adaptations of his own works may likewise be understood as an Ernauxian inheritance.

In the exhibition “Exteriors: Annie Ernaux and Photography” (2024), curator Lou Stoppard juxtaposed “snapshots” of Ernaux’s writing with photographs of everyday life by Martine Franck, Daido Moriyama, William Klein, and many others. This exhibition invites us to appreciate the photographic quality of Ernaux’s writing, and to consider visual artists as her “heirs.” In 2024-25 in London, a stage adaptation of *The Years* made headlines when an abortion scene caused many theatregoers to faint. This raises questions about the impact of re-presenting subject matter across different media, though we invite contributors to attend to the distinction between adaptation and inheritance.

SUBMISSIONS

Please send proposals via this online form by Monday 30 November 2026: <https://forms.office.com/r/ep4MvEXmEb>. You may direct questions to the volume editors, Beth Kearney (b.kearney@uq.edu.au) and Alexandra Pugh (alexandra.pugh@queens.ox.ac.uk).

All contributions will be in English, and English translations of all foreign language material should be provided. The exception here is creative contributions, which may be multilingual depending on the aims, scope, and ambition of the piece. Chapters are expected to be 5,000-6,500 words in length.

PROJECT TIMELINE

Submissions due: Monday 30 November 2026

Notification of the editors’ decisions on chapters: January 2027

Full chapters due: May 2027

Peer review: May-November 2027

Publication: 2028

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NOTES

1. See Wroblewski's comparative analysis of the transgressive poetics and aesthetics of Ernaux and Sophie Calle.
2. See *Things I Don't Want to Know*, *The Cost of Living*, and *Real Estate*.
3. See Ernaux's *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure*, translated respectively as *Exteriors* and *Things Seen*.
4. For more on Ernaux's place within a broader tradition of photobiography, see Kawakami and Arribert-Narce.

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CFP: Annie Ernaux International Studies, no. 3: The Heirs of Annie Ernaux. In: ArtHist.net, Jul 8, 2026 (accessed Jul 8, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/53416>>.