



Jennifer Cooke, *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, ISBN 9781108779692).

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The first two decades of the twenty-first century have seen a plethora of writers, who have challenged and expanded previous notions of feminist life writing. In *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity*, Jennifer Cooke identifies works by thirteen contemporary writers as examples of what she refers to as a new audacity in life writing. Several of these writers are young, early in their careers, and already connected with each other through reviewers or publishers. Defining audacity as a ‘public challenge to conventions, characterized by a disregard for decorum, protocol, or moral restraints,’ Cooke refers to the thirteen writers as feminists, even when they do not directly engage with politics. Unlike their predecessors, she clarifies further, these writers are writing in the wake of queer, gender and trauma theory, and post-structural critiques of binary thinking. They view identity as social constructions manifested both materially and bodily. Through the perspectives that these writers offer on their lives and the experimental form their writing takes, Cooke argues, they are reshaping feminism and its concerns.

Cooke begins her study with a focus on writing that provides what she defines as audacious accounts of sexual abuse and rape. Tracy Emin, Virginie Despentes and Jana Leo have all written about their rapes. Challenging norms that name and shame women, who have been the targets of sexual abuse and rape, into silence, Emin instead shames her male perpetrators by including their full names in her autobiography. Without denying the trauma of rape, or the personal responsibility of the men who raped them, Despentes and Leo refuse to present rape as an isolated

incident. In their writing, they audaciously widen the focus from themselves as individual victims of rape to the larger socio-economic and patriarchal structures that create and enable rapists and place women in vulnerable positions. As such, the three writers question social mores that criticize women for non-normative behavior and the misconception that victimization always equals silence.

The premise for Cooke's next set of readings is that notions of authorship and literary genius are not only coded as male, but rest on the display of unflattering, or 'ugly,' aspects of the self. Sheila Heti, Kate Zambreno and Alison Bechdel, Cooke shows, audaciously display ugly facets of themselves in their writing, such as a desire for greatness, the betrayal of people for artistic purposes, and the ugliness of writer's block. These kinds of ugliness may be necessary for the aesthetic process, but also leave writers open to accusations of self-promotion and narcissism. In a defense against such accusations, Cooke points to the relationships that the three writers describe having with other women, however problematic or ethically questionable these relationships may be. In a somewhat circular fashion Cooke then suggests that it is precisely the problematic nature of these relationships that stops these women's writing from adhering to earlier notions of feminist life writing as relational and self-effacing.

In the study's remaining chapters, Cooke turns to writing that in several cases offers the greatest challenges to conventional notions of life writing and to feminism. Focusing on sexual vulnerability in the life writing of Katherine Angel, Chris Kraus and Marie Calloway, Cooke argues that female vulnerability does not have to equal weakness in heterosexual relations. She convincingly shows that by writing audaciously about their desire to submit sexually to a man for adventurous reasons, Angel and Kraus highlight seemingly unresolvable contradictions in feminist definitions of female sexuality. Calloway's writing proves more problematic. Cooke recognizes that the excitement Calloway describes as feeling during her sexual degradation by older men can be interpreted as a result of narcissism, naiveté or autism rather than feminism. In contrast to such interpretations, Cooke writes, she 'desires Calloway to be strong, manipulative, and clever,' linking this desire to a readership starving for authentic accounts of 'young, female sexuality.' A sympathetic reading that focuses on the authorial distance to what is described allows Cooke to argue the exploratory nature of Calloway's accounts of bodily experience and male sexual exploitation of young women. The aesthetic aspects of her writing, Cooke insists, turn Calloway into a sexual participant with agency rather than a victim.

The penultimate chapter of Cooke's study deals with the writing of trans lives. Maggie Nelson, Paul B. Preciado and Juliet Jacques have abandoned the structural conventions of earlier trans life writing, in which the act of transition gave shape and direction to the narrative. In different ways, Cooke claims, the three writers explored in this chapter have sought to expand the term trans. Nelson and Preciado both compare trans change to other states of instability, such as changes experienced during pregnancy, or to the global transmission of information and form. To Cooke, Nelson's universalizing and normalizing of trans nevertheless risk erasing the political specificity and radicalism of queerness and trans identity. In contrast, Cooke offers a more sympathetic reading of Paul B. Preciado's and Juliet Jacques's writing. She outlines how Preciado moves between the personal and the theoretical in alternating chapters in his work. Criticizing the commodification of the changing human body by the pharmaceutical and pornography industries, Preciado presents a theory and a practice of gender fluidity through descriptions of his illegal self-administration of testosterone. Cooke acknowledges instances of sexism and racialization in Preciado's work, stressing that 'there are ... deeply problematic examples in [his work] of how he exhibits his masculinity.' She also identifies a tendency in Preciado to burden women with the responsibility for both hormonal and social change. Instead of asking how valid her claim that Preciado is a feminist can be in such a context, however, she favors a reading that stresses the utopian aspects of Preciado's writing, linking a radical feminist condemnation of capitalism and the pharmaceutical industry to his utopian demand for the free and unrestricted flow of hormone drugs.

Chapter four ends with Cooke's reading of Jacques' de-dramatization of trans life. Proposing that the audacity of Nelson's and Preciado's writing is partly an effect of their ability to shock, the audacity of Jacques' writing, Cooke continues, lies in his refusal to do just that, thereby thwarting expectations of trans life as glamorous. Audacity, Cooke reminds her readers here and elsewhere, is always a product of context. In her study's fifth chapter, Cooke again touches upon this aspect of audacity as she returns to the topic of rape. In this chapter, she focuses on a single author and her work, the conceptual poet Vanessa Place's *Tragodia*, a three-volume publication that reproduces court reports Place has written as an appellant attorney for jailed rapists and pedophiles. Cooke's painstaking comparisons between one of the cases in *Tragodia* with the original legal documents and another of Place's non-poetic works, *The Guilt Project*, lead her to conclude that *Tragodia* is a conceptually audacious but 'ethically troubling' project. More specifically, Cooke argues that the

conceptual audacity of the project undermines Place's elsewhere stated feminist position on rape and the victimization of sex workers.

In *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity*, Cooke sets out to define new audacity writing. Her readings show that 'new audacity' is a term defined by contradictions and challenges. What seems audacious to one reader may not seem so to another. Place's conceptual poetry is formally audacious, but problematic from a feminist perspective that audaciously seeks to challenge perceptions of sex-workers as victims. Nor does what appears audacious at a certain moment in time necessarily remain so. A case in point are the sexually explicit scenes in the introductions to Nelson's and Preciado's trans writing, which Cooke recognizes are turning into a trans life writing standard. In this context, Cooke's inclusion of Jacques' more mundane and less privileged depictions of trans life suddenly appears as the more audacious.

A contextual definition of audacity is not necessarily a problem. When paired with the claim that the audacity expressed by Cooke's chosen writers is feminist, however, it sometimes risks becoming so. This is especially the case with Cooke's highly sympathetic readings of Calloway's and Preciado's writing. To present these authors as feminist, her readings become selective, ultimately setting aside aspects of their writing that might undermine that claim. Here, Cooke seems to have concluded that diluting the feminism which she assigns to these writers is an acceptable trade-off, especially in the context of these writers' previous critical reception. For all that, Cooke's readings of the experimental contemporary writing she has chosen to include in her study are intellectually rigorous and exciting. *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity* is an important and welcome addition to existing scholarship on contemporary feminist life writing.