

Drabinski, Kate. Review of Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity, by Jennifer Cooke. *Biography* 45, no. 1 (2022): 121-124. doi:10.1353/bio.2022.0028

Access to this work was provided by the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) ScholarWorks@UMBC digital repository on the Maryland Shared Open Access (MD-SOAR) platform.

Please provide feedback

Please support the ScholarWorks@UMBC repository by emailing scholarworks-group@umbc.edu and telling us what having access to this work means to you and why it's important to you. Thank you.

Works Cited

Micir, Melanie. *The Passion Projects: Modernist Women, Intimate Archives, Unfinished Lives*. Princeton UP, 2019.

von Freytag-Loringhoven, Elsa. *Body Sweats: The Uncensored Writings of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven*, edited by Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo, MIT Press, 2011.

Pamela L. Caughie (she/her/hers) is Professor Emerita of English and Women's Studies and Gender Studies at Loyola University Chicago, and a former president of the Modernist Studies Association. Over the past decade she has become increasingly involved in the digital humanities, serving as a coeditor of Woolf Online, codirector of Modernist Networks, and Project Director for the Lili Elbe Digital Archive. Caughie is author of two monographs, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* (U of Illinois P, 1991) and *Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility* (U of Illinois P, 1999), and editor or coeditor of four works, most recently, *Man into Woman: A Comparative Scholarly Edition* (Bloomsbury, 2020).

Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity

Jennifer Cooke

Cambridge UP, 2020, viii + 226 pp. ISBN 9781108489911, \$99.00 hardcover.

Jennifer Cooke's *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity* is itself an audacious addition to the theoretical literature about life writing, self-narrative, and queer and feminist literary theory. Cooke's central intervention is the idea of "the new audacity," which she defines in the introduction as "a public challenge to conventions, characterised by boldness and a disregard for decorum, protocol, or moral restraints" (1–2). Audacity is about taking risks, experimenting with form and genre, and challenging expected narratives of gender in the context of sexual violence, sexual pleasure, and writing the self. Cooke's book explores different ways that feminist life writers do this work, and in her analysis, Cooke actualizes her own argument, pointing to new futures for feminist thinking, writing, and subjectivity.

The first chapter of the book explores what Cooke calls the "new audacity in the writing of rape" (26). This is itself an audacious choice as a starting point given the sensitive nature of writing about sexual violence. The chapter addresses the work of three authors, Tracey Emin, Virginie Despentes, and Jana Leo. Each writer works in a different genre—essay, manifesto, and self-help guide—in a way that plays with genre, and each demonstrates audacity in talking about their own experiences of rape in the context of cultural expectations of silence. Cooke builds on Leigh Gilmore's *Tainted Witness* to explore how these writers break the silence imposed by the refusal of society to believe what we say. These authors refuse this imperative and refuse to feel shame as they reassert their agency through writing about rape.

Aligning her work with Rita Felski's insistence that feminist confession is itself a form of political discourse, Cooke also explores the audacity of these writers in putting the blame for their rapes squarely on patriarchal expectations that women stay home for their own safety, and on capitalist systems that make rape profitable. Despentès, for example, writes that her landlord's refusal to invest in basic security for her building to increase his own profit is partly to blame for her rape. Despentès shifts the shame from herself as a victim, and even from her rapist, and onto the systems and structures that produce the conditions of rape and allow others to profit from it. The three writers discussed in this chapter all push for new ways of understanding the structural roots of sexual violence.

Chapter 2 shifts the vision of audacity away from the political desire for social change to look at how authors write about their "own ugly behaviors and desires" (64). Cooke situates audacity a little differently here, placing it in the longer tradition of autobiography as personal confession. Where this tradition has long welcomed men's self-writing in modes now sometimes considered narcissistic or self-centered, women have rarely had the literary space to write about themselves as independent beings. Building again on Gilmore's work, Cooke ultimately argues for understanding self-writing as relational, pushing against masculinist conventions of the genre by considering the work of Sheila Heti, Kate Zambreno, and Alison Bechdel.

The chapter unfolds as the first did and the rest will: taking the reader through the work of each author to point out the ways they are audacious, and how their audacity produces new ways of thinking about both gender and genre. Bechdel is audacious for how she betrays her parents in her storytelling and for how she writes about her struggles with mental health and the writing process itself. Heti and Zambreno write themselves as unlikeable narrators, audacious given that in self-writing the self is usually cast as a sympathetic and likeable character. The prevailing attitude is that the struggle to write should remain hidden, and thus the refusal to keep it that way is an audacious move. Despite these struggles, though, all three writers succeed in expressing themselves, exhibiting what Cooke calls "the audacity to put the self at the centre of one's story" (88). But is it still audacious for women to center themselves in their own stories, to be open about parts of ourselves that might be ugly in the eyes of some? The concept of audacity is so flexible in the book that at times its meaning feels unclear.

Cooke's third chapter examines the audacity of women writing their own sexual autobiographies that shatter the norms and expectations of women's sexual vulnerability. In the first chapter, Cooke demonstrated that vulnerability does not equal victimhood, and here Cooke explores what she calls "voluntary vulnerability." She asks, "But what if rendering oneself vulnerable within a private heterosexual relationship, outside of a scene or a script, is what you desire?" (93). Cooke claims this is "new audacity," as these writers move beyond critical theorizations of BDSM and sexual liberation that emerged from the feminist sex wars. These writers tell stories of their own vulnerability that others might argue are simply capitulations

to patriarchal understandings of women's sexuality as that which is dominated and controlled. In exploring texts by Katherine Angel, Chris Kraus, and Marie Callo-way, the chapter argues that even as these authors write about their own sexual submissiveness and seem to occupy sexist stereotypes, they have agency—in their naming and shaming of men and in their insistence that vulnerability and intelligence can go together, and that the “ultimate act of agency” is their publishing such stories in the first place (133).

Chapter 4 moves away from arguments about women's agency as writers to look at self-writing that challenges the gender binary itself. Paul B. Preciado, Maggie Nelson, and Juliet Jacques each demonstrate “the audacity to be impatient with the gender binary and the thinking that accompanies it” (134). All three reject tropes of transgender experience that center transition, in terms of the movement from one side of the gender binary to the other, only to remain there permanently. Cooke begins her analysis with Jay Prosser's groundbreaking book, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. In it, Prosser demonstrates how the demand to account for one's transgender self in the clinician's office in order to access care grounds transgender identity in autobiography, whether written down or not, and that those autobiographies have largely followed settled tropes about transgender identity as binary, permanent, and lifelong. Preciado's *Testo Junkie* is an experimental piece that refuses the “wrong body” trope of transgender identity, instead challenging binary gender itself, along with binaries between fiction and memoir. Preciado turns his gaze from his own body and onto a society that makes demands on his body, and all of ours. Nelson's work is audacious in a different way, refusing expectations of trans life as inherently transgressive. Although *The Argonauts* opens with a transgressive sex scene, Cooke argues that it ultimately tells the story of an almost heteronormative life, one that challenges the focus on body and subjectivity of much transgender life writing. Jacques's writing similarly takes on what Cooke calls “queer normativity” in a book that refuses to tell only the story of transition. Instead, Jacques “de-dramatises” (162) transgender experience by folding it into a fuller account of life that includes embodied shifts outside of gender transition. Cooke's points here are important and help readers expand their understanding of trans self-writing. That said, many transgender authors write beyond the transition story, even if transition is part of their story. At what point does such writing cease to be audacious?

Throughout the book, the idea of audacity is presented as positive, transgressive, and potentially transformative of genre, identity, and the sociopolitical writ large. The final chapter of the book, however, looks at the potential dangers of audacity through a close reading of Vanessa Place's controversial trilogy, *Tragodia*. The *Tragodia* pulls together Place's work as a defense attorney for those charged and convicted of sex offenses. Drawing on summaries and testimonies from thirty-three appeals cases, Place contradictorily describes sex workers as victims and autonomous agents. Place's descriptions of sex crimes read on the surface as factual, but they also read as plot, given the narrative style of the pieces. Cooke calls

Place an audacious writer, citing her habit of posting rape jokes and her use of an image of the character “Mammy” from the film *Gone with the Wind* as her avatar on social media. This is a writer and artist who is clearly audacious, if audacity is understood as transgressing boundaries and refusing models of civility often thrust on women. But is it *feminist* audacity? Cooke persuasively argues that it is not. Cooke ultimately sees Place’s work as a dangerous audacity that uses the lives and experiences of poor people of color to comment on genre, turning the reader into a voyeur rather than a subject who can be urged to think differently about the agency of sex workers and survivors of sexual violence. She concludes, “the politics of new audacity writers are not always clear, and audacity can be mobilised for politically murky and ambiguous ends as well as those we can celebrate as unequivocally feminist” (201).

This final insight is vital to understanding the overall importance of Cooke’s project. “The new audacity” of the feminist writers Cooke considers can be read in multiple ways once readers have this concept in hand. How do these different life writers challenge ideas about genre and gender? About power, submission, and victimhood? And how do our own readings shape what these writers mean in the first place? Although Place’s work, and Maggie Nelson’s to a lesser extent, are challenged for the conservative turns their work can take, any of the writers in the collection could be read that way, using the tools Cooke offers us. Rather than being a weakness of the book, however, this is its real power. The conceptual lens of audacity remains porous and open to interpretation. In Cooke’s text, audacity is demonstrated by writing against all kinds of norms and expectations: of sexual subjectivity, of genre, of victimhood and agency, of gendered assumptions of genius, and more. Beyond its original and creative readings, Cooke’s text reminds us to read for transgression, which opens up space to think *differently*. Ultimately, Cooke offers us new ways of thinking about feminist life writing, and she leaves room for different interpretations—a reminder of the power of literary criticism itself.

Works Cited

- Felski, Rita. *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*. Harvard UP, 1989.
- Gilmore, Leigh. *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives*. Columbia UP, 2018.
- Prosser, Jay. *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. Columbia UP, 1998.

Kate Drabinski is Principal Lecturer in Gender, Women’s, and Sexuality Studies at University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She is coeditor with P. Nicole King and Joshua Davis of *Baltimore Revisited: Stories of Inequality and Resistance in a U.S. City* (Rutgers UP, 2019). She is currently at work on a memoir about twin sisterhood, queerness, and cancer.