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Review: *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity* by Jennifer Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020)

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Jennifer Cooke's monograph *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity* is a recent addition to the Cambridge Studies in Twenty-First-Century Literature and Culture. The series offers a philosophically nuanced account of the twenty-first-century intellectual landscape, as Cooke's book demonstrates. Aimed primarily at scholars and advanced readers, *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing* consists of a carefully curated work of criticism of what Cooke calls 'the new audacity', a form of contemporary feminist life-writing that challenges autobiographical conventions. Cooke argues that 'unlike their second-wave predecessors [new audacity writers] write in the wake of queer, gender, and trauma theory, post-structuralist and Derridean critiques of binary thinking' (9). Building on a long history of women's experimental life-writing scholarship, Cooke's study examines these writers' personal and theoretical relation to contemporary thought. In so doing, she points to the powerful presence of theory within contemporary feminist life-writing and the forms of fearlessness that its authors deploy.



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The introduction offers a thorough assessment of existing scholarship on women's and feminist autobiography. A well-researched and exciting intervention in the field, Cooke draws from previous approaches to the experimental couplet genre and gender such as Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, Leigh Gilmore, Rita Felski, and Linda Anderson. Like her predecessors, Cooke acknowledges early twentieth-century autobiography and avant-garde writing as key antecedents of feminist life-writing. In addition, she maps the context of new audacity writers through two literary movements: French autofiction and the new sincerity. These two, for Cooke, have allowed for 'a literary embodiment of continental post-structuralism' (20) and an appreciation of 'texts as affective experiences for their readers' (21), respectively. Cooke aims to situate the new audacity alongside labels that attend to 'emergent literary moods' (22).

The book's primary aim is to examine how new audacity writers redefine their feminism in the creative practice by reflecting on the larger political implications of their individual experiences (4–5). Interestingly, Cooke resists using the widely known neologism 'autotheory'; however, she attends to these writers' explicit personal and political engagement with contemporary thought, and notes that 'the imbrication of life with intellectual ideas, questions, and arguments is a defining feature' (4). While Cooke acknowledges that this overlap between life-writing and intellectual ideas has been characteristic of feminist legacies concerned with authorship, she convincingly demonstrates that new audacity writers 'refuse to glamorise writing and, in the process, challenge conventional notions of self-authorship' (2). As the chapters show, new audacity writers revisit forms of gendered violence but resist fixed notions of victimhood and pathology. Key to this resistance then is their diverse writing about sex, which explores not only the politics of rape culture, but also the value of

‘non-normative desires, intimacies, and lovers [that] disrupt how [new audacity writers] think they inhabit the world and how others react to them’ (3). For Cooke, these writers experiment not only with life-writing but with life itself, which, she suggests, has formal implications in their work.

Chapter one consists of an examination of accounts of rape and the affective forces at play in the skilful retelling of what may seem only ‘factual descriptions of violence’ in the work of Tracey Emin, Virginie Despentes, and Jana Leo (23). For Cooke, the audacious and experimental retelling of traumatic experiences allows for a political reading of rape and creates affective impact on their readers. Specifically, Cooke looks at Leo’s and Despentes’s ‘body-essays’, texts that draw from the authors’ personal experiences of rape to examine social arguments without ‘indulg[ing] the familiar rhetorical investments’ in victim and evildoer roles. Cooke rightly highlights how they ‘try to understand [their] rape as the by-product of a systemic injustice which produces criminals like [their] rapist[s]’ (43). Attempting to reshape the social and emotional markers that define systemic violence is audacious.

Chapter two focuses on the writer as artist. It looks at Alison Bechdel’s *Are You My Mother?* (2012), Sheila Heti’s *How Should a Person Be?* (2012), and Kate Zambreno’s *Heroines* (2012). Cooke’s convincing argument follows the authors’ interest in ‘female genius’. Particularly audacious for Cooke is the way Heti, Zambreno, and Bechdel recreate the ugliness of the creative process. Although the works result in a self-portrait of not very likeable writers, Cooke notes that they leave behind the ‘sphere of simple self-interest [...] by unravelling the shape, significance, and ethical pitfalls of relationships with other women’ (66–67). This audacity, for the author, entails a feminist achievement insofar as it demystifies the act of writing as a glamorous, inspiration-informed creation and instead insists on the author’s affective and intellectual confrontation with herself.

Chapter three examines desire in the context of heterosexual relationships in Katherine Angel’s *Unmastered: A Book on Desire, Most Difficult to Tell* (2012), Chris Kraus’s *I Love Dick* (1997), and Marie Calloway’s *what purpose did i serve in your life* (2013). Cooke follows the authors’ frank exploration of sexual vulnerability, namely, their submission to men (97), and claims that ‘their writing challenges the easy association between vulnerability and weakness, and the assumption that submission is a fundamental personality trait or flaw rather than a position capable of exploration and potential exploitation’ (98). Cooke thus notes their commitment to theorising feminist sexuality from an audacious, vulnerable position: that of the heterosexual woman who keeps encountering the problems of feminist sex.

Chapter four concerns writing about trans-lives and the ways it audaciously challenges binary thinking in an heteropatriarchal context. Cooke looks at Juliet Jacques's *Trans: A Memoir* (2015), Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015), and Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (2013). Like she does in the writer as artist chapter, Cooke maintains that to write about failure, difficulty, and depression is an audacious act (136). This time, however, she focuses on the authors' 'fatigue "with labels in general"' (Jacques 301, qtd. in Cooke 137) and their engagement with the personal and the theoretical from the point of view of gender terminology. Cooke's insightful critique is informed by Nelson's recontextualisation of the Barthesian figure of the Argo, 'which she uses to conceptualise subjectivity in constant transformation' (143) within the life-writing by and about trans people.

The most audacious chapter of all, chapter five examines poet Vanessa Place's trilogy *Tragodia* (2010–11) and other works by Place where she audaciously provokes her readers by reproducing traumatic material of rape cases in which she acts as an appellant attorney. Cooke is interested in the paradox of audacious writing that 'fails to adhere to coherent feminist principles' (24) by using the tragedy of other women. Nonetheless, Cooke finds value in Place's 'conceptual audacity', which works as an instance of complex contradictions in contemporary feminist thought by virtue of an experimentalism that insists on language's capacity to shape perception and judgements (24; 180). In addition to its singularly complex politics, Place's work also leaves behind the 'commitment to authenticity' (203) so characteristic of other audacity writers, which in itself evinces Cooke's critical awareness of the multiplicity of forms of feminist life-writing.

Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity concludes that 'audacity is always a matter of cultural context' (204). What once was audacious may not be anymore. In this sense, feminism in all its shapes has and continues to be an intrinsically audacious act seeking to collectively name systemic gendered violence. It follows that feminist writing is intimately linked to lived experiences. Cooke avers that 'when there is no longer a need for [feminism], [audacity's] link to gender will become a matter of historical record' (204). In the meantime, we need to pay attention to new writing that challenges the very definition of a feminist stance. Overall, the book is an ambitious and exciting undertaking to extend the already complex theoretical discussion about gender and genre. As acknowledged by the author herself, however, the book does not engage with the life-writing of racism, which elsewhere has proved to be a crucial site for feminist experimental life-writing. Further research into non-white experimental life-writing would only enrich Cooke's argument, a foundational contribution to scholarship on very recent and exciting literary works.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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