

REPRODUCING FEMINIST WRITING: *CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST LIFE-WRITING*

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Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing, written by Jennifer Cooke, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2020 as the first phase of a long-running project. The book, which approaches the gender issue from a different perspective in its biographical works and examines all this problem from a “feminist” perspective, offers readers a special study on different topics prepared with an up-to-date methodology and contains important clues about the future of biographical writing.

Jennifer Cooke’s work first comes to the fore with its involvement with many different authors and its discussion ground on new ideas. In this sense, parallel to Cooke, the book contains the statements of many feminist writers, poets and intellectuals, as well as many victims who have been harassed and raped; and refused to remain silent and seek their rights to the end. In this sense, the book, which has a very solid foundation on which it is based, offers the reader an in-depth approach to contemporary feminist ideas.

Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing actually begins with Jennifer Cooke’s explanation of the concept of “new audacity”, which she has built in her book. Cooke, who explains her basic thought on this subject in the “Introduction” part of the work, defines “new audacity” as “many feminist people act rather than remain silent in the face of harassment, insult and shameful behavior”. According to this, the victims, who are no longer silent, seek their rights, resist the attacks against them and never stop fighting so that the criminals can receive the

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punishments they deserve, constitute the basis of this power and this concept. These people, who do not accept to remain silent in any way, take on a stimulating role for many “victims” with their courage and perform an important job in order to encourage the masses. In addition, all these people come to the fore with their struggle against the social structure acting on male-dominated, heterosexual and class codes. This war of the victims, who embark on a struggle more difficult than anyone has ever done in order to use the right to determine their own future to the full, becomes concrete with the concept of “new audacity”. Cooke revisits the concept of “feminism” within the scope of the book, while reforming this definition, she also touches on the main pillars on which it is based. In this way, the author, who created a certain road map at the beginning of her work, also makes references to the problems she will continue to tackle in the future. The author, who goes to a new definition in the context of “history of experimental feminist life-writing”, thus performs a different job with the approach Cooke brings to the world of concepts. Stating that parallel to all these concepts, her own way is different from “French autofiction”, the author adds that there is a new understanding of sincerity in this new “narrative”. *“This book identifies what I am labelling a ‘new audacity’ evident in the contemporary life-writing produced by a number of feminists, many of whom are young, towards the beginning of their publishing careers, and all of whom experiment by testing the boundaries of autobiographical conventions.”* (Cooke, 2020: 2).

Stating that she has read the texts mentioned in the book closely, Cooke explains that the “emotional encounters” these studies contain show different types of issues that are also extremely important. Every experience we go through is personal and its results are subjective and Cooke wants to make it visible. *“I closely read these texts to analyse how they create and curate affective encounters in order to unsettle assumptions about sexuality, desire, sex work, the eroticism of female submission, trans lives, mental illness, rape, and feminism itself.”* (Cooke, 2020: 3) Cooke, on the other hand, does not neglect to introduce the authors to whom she applied for their works within the scope of the book, through the main issues and approaches they will address:

“Preciado, Leo, and Jacques adopt an alternating structure so that primarily factual and theoretical chapters are interspersed with chapters about their lives. For others – including Nelson, Angel, Zambreno, Kraus, and Despentés – life events both quotidian and disruptive propel reflection, a process that repeatedly tracks from individual, personal

experiences to thinking through their collective and political implications.” (Cooke, 2020: 3-4)

The first part of the book, “Autobiography as Feminist Praxis: New Audacity in the Writing of Rape”, basically uses three authors and three texts. Books titled Tracey Emin’s *Strangeland* (2005), Jana Leo’s *Rape New York* (2009), and Virginie Despentes’s *King Kong Theory* (2006) are subjected to a “close reading” by the author in this sense. Cooke, who first set out in this process with her book Emin’s *Strangeland*, offers different views on her approach to the rapist with a “feminist practice” and then touches on the interesting points in the texts of other authors. The article, which focuses on cases such as abuse and rape, then examines the social importance of rape through the books of Leo and Despentes, and makes visible the political messages behind this problem. At this point, Cooke develops a new concept called “affective audacity” and expresses it with the following words: “*This is what I am calling the text’s affective audacity: the fact that the reading encounter with the rape is so impactful that it carries over and lends affective force to the related arguments the book makes about rape, poverty, and property development.*” (Cooke, 2020: 49) This concept basically undertakes the idea of alerting the reader to wider arguments about their actions.

Another special concept for Cooke in this section is “body-essay”. Cooke describes this with the following words: “Her body-essay starts from the position of having the ‘wrong’ body and the ‘wrong’ attributes to attract the ‘right’ heterosexually desiring look.” (Cooke, 2020: 61) Cooke, on the other hand, mainly acts on this concept through Despentes’ *King Kong Theory*. Despentes uses the following statements on this subject in her book: “*I am writing as a woman who is always too much of everything – too aggressive, too noisy, too fat, too rough, too hairy, always too masculine, I am told.*” (Despentes, 2006: 9) The section, in which the dynamics of society and the traumas caused by sexual assaults are also evaluated, emphasizes the importance of their struggle against the attacks that all three authors have been victims of. In this sense, “body-essay”, which is defined by Cooke, becomes concrete through Emin, Leno and Despentes. Thus, a special ground is prepared for the rhetorical and formal side of the subject.

The second chapter of the book, “Ugly Audacities in Auto/biography” takes the focus of modern authors and their relationship with their environment. Jennifer Cooke, in this sense, primarily Alison Bechdel’s *Are You My Mother?* (2012), Sheila Heti’s *How Should a Person Be?* (2012), and Kate Zambreno’s *Heroines* (2012) and states that the works are distinguished by their characteristics.

The three books that are the subject of this chapter are not actually directly autobiographical/biographical texts, but show characteristics of this genre in many ways. First of all, Bechdel's book carries different autobiographical values as a "graphic memoir". Moreover, this book draws attention with the fact that it goes beyond the style we are used to and presents a narrative woven with graphics in its content. Bechdel brings up her relationship with her mother throughout her book, and this makes it easier for Cooke to do "psychotherapeutic unraveling" of her character. In another book, Heti talks about her relationship with her close friend and artist Margaux, and deals with problems such as how a person should be, what are expected of her. On the other hand, although Heti's work is in the form of a novel, it also contains many personal aspects about the author/artist. Kate Zambreno, on the other hand, evaluates three female writers of modern literature in her book, which deals with half-moment, half-trial style: Virginia Woolf, Vivien(e) Eliot, and Zelda Fitzgerald. According to Zambreno, these 3 women writers who are "mad wives of modernism" are also extremely important in the context of feminist literature. Based on these three distinct writers and text, Cooke reveals how successful the "female genius" is in creating. Moreover, this production, carried out in different forms, reveals that a genre such as autobiography/ biography cannot be reduced to a single form. *"What does it mean to be a writer of the self? This question is asked by the authors to whom I now turn, and answered through an audacious revelation of their own ugly behaviours and desires."* (Cooke, 2020: 64) The self is always at the forefront in this context. On the other hand, the author states that "ugliness" is also an important issue for her at this point, and evaluates that this issue can yield seminal results in terms of aesthetics: "the ugliness of the self and its secrets, the ugliness of writer's block, the ugliness of betrayal, and the ugly terrain of genius."

"Nobody, it is probably safe to say, wishes to be deemed ugly, yet in revealing the ugly facets of themselves that emerge when they write, Sheila Heti, Kate Zambreno, and Alison Bechdel risk precisely such a judgement." (Cooke, 2020: 64)

"Stripping Off for the First Time" deals with the concepts of "desire" and "sexuality", which are still heavily discussed today. At this point, one of the main points that come to the fore for Cooke is the position of "heterosexual women" in feminist discourse. Because women, who are oppressed and kept under pressure in different ways in such environments, constitute an important part of the discourse. At this point, the three books that shape the chapter are: 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).

“In these books, the authors place themselves sexually and emotionally into the hands of the men they desire. The writing and publication of these desires and intimacies further exposes them, and, in an additional layer to the metaphors of stripping off, for each woman it is her first book. Whilst not without precedent, sexual autobiography is still an audacious genre, especially for a woman as she embarks on a writing career, a fact reflected in the provocative titles of these.” (Cooke, 2020: 93-94)

Not conservative about sex and desire, this section focuses on the subject of “vulnerability's association” that heterosexual women want and experience with their own will. Evaluating this issue in the context of feminist discourse, the section clearly reveals what kind of consequences, relationships and bonds of voluntary commitment to a man can be established. On the other hand, the authors who brought up an issue that was so complicated to articulate in their first books clearly show how brave they are within the scope of “new audacity”.

“Breaking the Binaries” is a section that mainly acts on “trans people” and the boundaries of this concept are opened to discussion. In recent years, the boundaries of the LGBT+Q movement have been expanded by adding new concepts such as gay, lesbian, crossdressing, and trans etc. In this context, each individual who became a part of this large group contributed to the progress of the field and the enlargement of the area with the problems he/she raised in parallel with his/her own problematic. Therefore, this section, in which gender identity is discussed from different angles, is a text that asks how trans people establish a dialogue with capitalist institutions and organizations, how the boundaries of this interaction are determined and what are the basic dynamics for communication, and contains answers within itself.

Jennifer Cooke focuses on books written by people who are all trans, within the scope of this section: Juliet Jacques's *Trans: A Memoir* (2015) and *Weekend in Brighton* (2015), Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015), and Paul Preciado's *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (2013).

Jacques, Nelson, and Preciado do something different from transgender people before them within the scope of their books and abandon the “dramatic structure” often used during gender reassignment. Especially, these authors, who open to discussion how the term “trans”

differentiates semantically over time, bring new possibilities to the subject through their own personal experiences. At this point, Nelson and Preciado especially emphasize the “pregnant woman body”. In these discourses, the word “trans” gains a completely natural value and a “daring” move is made. Jacques focuses on the “new gender identities” of the 21st century in her book. Jacques, who writes in a “dedramitized” way and makes events less dramatizing, touches on the importance of social behavior and social organizations in the context of feminism. For Cooke, all these authors express a special value in terms of approaching the subject from a different perspective with the trans values and identities they directly carry. This highly daring perspective offered by them is also encouraging for transgender people who will come after them.

Stating that the 3 texts in question entered the dialogue with different names, Cooke then made the following statements:

“*Testo Junkie, Trans, and The Argonauts* all engage with feminism. Nelson weaves quotes from feminist theorists such as Judith Butler and Sara Ahmed throughout the book. As a lesbian, she notes that ‘whatever sameness I’ve noted in my relationships with women is not the sameness of Woman, and certainly not the sameness of parts. Rather, it is the shared, crushing understanding of what it means to live in a patriarchy.’²” (Cooke, 2020: 136)

In the continuation of Cooke’s words, she points out some of the ongoing discussions and differences on this issue:

“Trans people share this knowledge and there should be a natural alliance between trans and feminist politics as a result. Sadly, this has not always been the case. Trans-exclusionary radical feminists, whose commitment to an essentialist view of sex and gender means they refuse to accept trans women as women, have been exceptionally vocal and divisive in their attempts to discredit trans women’s rights and to discount and disparage their identities.³” (Cooke, 2020: 136)

² Cooke’s note: A. B. Silvera, ‘BORED_TRAN_21st_CENTURY.EXE’, *Radical Transfeminism* (Leith: Sociopathic Distro, 2017), pp. 6–10, at p. 7.

³ Cooke’s note: M. Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2015), p. 25.

All these different views bring about new problems and divisions that still push many people to take a different front today.

“The Dangers of Audacity” puts a very interesting personality, Vanessa Place, who is also a lawyer and artist, at its center. Preparing a three-volume publication titled *Place’s Tragodia* on its plot from 2010 to 2011, Place is known for her advocacy about poor sex workers (vis-à-vis the sex workers) and pedophilia victims in many hearings. In this sense, comparing the court minutes published by Place with the texts/works published by Place as an artist, Cooke creates an extremely interesting argument. In this context, the author, who puts *The Guilt Project* in the foreground, argues that Place’s behavior actually complicates feminism. Cooke stated that Place, who developed a special system of her own conceptually, made the situation worse for the sex workers and pedophilia victims represented by her, adding that this situation works against feminism at some points.

“Vanessa Place is an audacious poet who courts controversy. She posts rape jokes as status updates on Facebook and has recently published a book using the same material, *You Had to Be There: Rape Jokes*⁴ (2018).¹ She has turned her name into a company, VanessaPlaceInc, with the tagline ‘It’s not the point, it’s the platform.’⁵ One of the objects the company put up for sale was a book of bound \$1 bills entitled \$20 and priced at \$50.⁶ In 2015, her regular tweeting of *Gone with the Wind* and adoption of ‘Mammy’ from the film as her avatar for doing so provoked such a furore that the subsequent debates hit the international press: she was accused of being a racist for performing in

⁴ Cooke’s note: For example, on 28 July 2017 she posted a picture of one of her tweets as a Facebook status. It read: ‘What’s black and blue and doesn’t like sex? I’ll let you know tomorrow. #gags’. She first published a collection of such jokes as an article, later a book, *You Had to Be There: Rape Jokes* (London: Penguin Random House, 2018). For the former, see V. Place, ‘Rape Jokes’, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 18:4 (2017), pp. 260–8. This issue of the journal features nine different essays on rape jokes, including Place’s.

⁵ Cooke’s note: VanessaPlaceInc’s tagline is from the Twitter feed description: twitter.com/VanessaPlaceInc. The account has been dormant since early 2014. It appears the ‘company’ has closed or the project been abandoned.

⁶ Cooke’s note: V. Place, ‘Interview with Vanessa Place’, interviewed by J. Bromberg, *The White Review* (October 2014).

blackface and for reproducing the text's racism⁷. Does repurposing problematic material repeat the offence or highlight and thus critique the original offensiveness?" (Cooke, 2020: 170)

Place has made a serious progress in her own writing journey through the courts and hearings she has taken up, while also violating many ethical issues. Therefore, this "audacity" that he exhibits individually brings along serious losses for some people. The writer, who is involved in all these events with a feminist point of view, assumes the role of the preparator of a process that will eventually have traumatic consequences. Considering both Place and other feminist writers and artists, this problem causes various risks, confusion and steels for other individuals at some point. This causes more problems for people who are already facing many problems.

Jennifer Cooke makes important suggestions on how feminist discourse can be reshaped in the 21st century in her book, *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing*, which constructs many new concepts and views within feminist discourse. Stating that there is no uniform discourse and progress, Cooke evaluates the authors, academics and artists she deals with in this sense from different perspectives and brings up the issues that draw attention to them. The author, who takes a very critical attitude in this sense, also states that the transformation is necessary and promising. In this sense, the concept of "new audacity" contains a potential power within itself.

"We will need the audacious voices of the present to continue to speak out and to speak up. *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity* has argued for the importance of such work within feminist and literary studies, within life-writing scholarship, and for those researching the contemporary. New audacity authors show us that writing lives is urgently necessary to the project of energising adical twenty-first-century change." (Cooke, 2020: 205).

⁷ Cooke's note: S. Martelle, 'Vanessa Place's Gone with the Wind Tweets: Artistic Expression or Racism?', *LA Times* (19 May 2015); E. Helmore, 'Gone with the Wind Tweeter Says She Is Being Shunned by Art Institutions', *The Guardian* (25 June 2015).

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