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Abstract

Review of Anna Rocca and Kenneth Reeds, eds. *Women Taking Risks in Contemporary Autobiographical Narratives*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2013. 232 pp.

Keywords

risk-taking, autobiography, life-writing, testimonial writing, women writers, gender, Francophone

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The collected essays of this book explore the nature and effects of risk and risk-taking in recent self-narrative representations of life events by women from a range of national and cultural backgrounds, including European, North African, Sub-Saharan African, and Caribbean. In their introduction to this singular, sustained analysis of an area in which there has thus far been a “dearth of analysis” (1), the editors, Anna Rocca and Kenneth Reeds, identify the importance, frequency, and benefits of both thematic and formal risk-taking in contemporary women’s autobiographical expression in literary, testimonial, photographic, and filmic form. Differentiating a focus on risk in literary studies from other fields of enquiry, such as medicine, security, and economics, which seek to minimize and avoid risk, the editors highlight the frequent association of risk in literary works and studies with courage and social responsibility, with personal and societal transformation and development, and with the power to envision new ways of being and of relating with others.

The wide-ranging essays assembled in this collection coherently and consistently concur on the particular recompenses of risk-taking for women in terms of altering the status quo, of shifting boundaries of constraint, and of achieving the articulation and exercise of agency. The focus on risk and risk-taking in this work is not limited thematically to the experiences related in the self-narrative accounts studied, but also extends to their generic and narrative strategies. For Rocca and Reeds, risk is intrinsic to the genre of autobiographical writing insofar as autobiographical narratives engage in the conscious exposure of the self, laying bare not only the writer’s life but also frequently the lives of those around her, a conception of self-narrative that is also reiterated throughout the chapters. Drawing in particular on Jennifer Willging and Leigh Gilmore’s theories of female-authored autobiography, self-narrative is demonstrated to be a particularly challenging—and rewarding—task for women who, historically, have been compelled to hide their voices in keeping with the injunctions of patriarchal socio-cultural values and expectations of female modesty.

The collection broaches the question of defining and measuring risk in women’s self-narratives through the organization of the fourteen essays presented around three key aspects of risk-taking: “Risky Disclosures,” “Risky Leaps,” and “Life as Risk.” Ranging from the risky disclosures of the losses and gains at stake in loving relationships, of the apparently contradictory contiguous representation of illness and sex, and of the representation of gender in conflict with traditional and stereotypical gender roles, Part I delves into the works of Assia Djebar, Nina Bouraoui, Annie Ernaux, Ken Bugul and Marie NDiaye. In a particular highlight, Noelle Giguere reveals how NDiaye

responds to the power of the autobiographical text and the risk of self-definition by exerting a certain control over the autobiographical writing to produce a cautious and highly controlled presentation of self, an approach to autobiographical writing which also resonates more widely with the other texts studied in this section.

Part II, "Risky Leaps," focuses on the author's process of responding to and drawing strength from past social or personal impasses, such as the particularly trying experiences which lie behind Virginie Despentes's feminist, autobiographical manifesto, *King Kong Théorie* (*King Kong Theory*), the confrontation with Algerian memory in *pied-noir* (pertaining to those in North Africa of European origin or descent during French colonial rule) women's writing (by Marie Cardinal, Frédérique Boblin, Eve Calo, Nelly Collet, and Fabienne Rozotte), the trauma of the premature death of a famous father and the resulting exploration of personal identity (in Marie Nimier and Clémence Boulouque), and the expression of the challenge to exploitative and corrupted rationalities of traditional values through the passage to first-person writing in North African women's writing (in Leïla Abouzeid, Houria Boussejra, Malika Mokeddem and Fatima Mernissi). The risk of challenging the traditions and strictures of family, community, and country in this section are shown both to exert a cost on their authors, and to offer immeasurable recompense.

The exploration and presentation of lives that are themselves characterized by danger, courage, deprivation, and loss form the focus of the third and final section, "Life as Risk." Risk here refers not only to the risks imposed on or undertaken by the women who are the subjects and authors of the texts studied in this section, but also to the manner and the fact of undertaking their first-person account. Examining texts which range from a female adventure journalist's response to her historical period's expectations of gender behaviors, to voluntary risk-taking as a response to the stifling experience of a traditional Islamic upbringing in the absence of parental support, and from the testimonial accounts of migration from Guadeloupe to 1950s Paris to that of the daughter's return to Rwanda in an attempt to save her mother from the genocide, the essays of Part III reflect on women's willingness to make courageous decisions in order to ameliorate their lives, and perhaps more importantly, to give voice to these experiences. From the risks of participating in and making film and text, Titajna, Mokeddem, Thérèse Parise Bernis and Maggy Corrêa express the rewards of catharsis, agency, and legacy rendered possible by autobiographical and testimonial writing.

Central to the essays thoughtfully compiled and presented here by the editors is the premise that women have much to gain from the risks involved in defying societal norms, of challenging inhibiting conceptualizations of individual, gendered, community, and national identities, of breaching discursive norms, and of the risky undertaking of autobiography itself, particularly evident in the laudable contributions by Anna Rocca and Jean Anderson. This volume will be of great interest and use to students and

scholars of Francophone contemporary women's writing and filmmaking, autobiographical writing, trauma studies, and gender.

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