



WOMEN TAKING RISKS IN CONTEMPORARY AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES

Edited by

Anna Rocca and Kenneth Reeds

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Autobiographical Narratives

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Women Taking Risks in Contemporary Autobiographical Narratives

Anna Rocca dedicates this book to Ornella,
one of the most courageous women of her time.

Kenneth Reeds dedicates it to his family,
unending support that permits one to take risks.

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INTRODUCTION

WOMEN TAKING RISKS IN CONTEMPORARY AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES

ANNA ROCCA
AND KENNETH REEDS

Jules César: "Cowards die many times before their deaths"—
et c'est vrai. ... Et cependant, tout le monde est lâche.
Alors autant savoir que l'ennemi principal dans la vie, c'est la peur.
Écrire n'a de sens que si le geste d'écrire fait reculer la peur.
(Calle-Gruber and Cixous, *Hélène Cixous* 35)

Women Taking Risks in Contemporary Autobiographical Narratives explores the nature and effects of risk in self-narrative representations of life events and is an early step towards confronting the dearth of analysis on this subject. The collection focuses on risk-taking as one of women's articulations of authorial agency displayed in literary, testimonial, photographic, travel and film documentary forms of autobiographical expression in French. Among many themes, the book fosters discussion on matters of courage, strength, resilience, freedom, self-fulfillment, political engagement, compassion, faith, and the envisioning of unconventional alliances that follow a woman's stepping out of her comfort zone. The fourteen essays included in this collection discuss works of women authors from North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, France and the Caribbean. They exemplify a variety of self-narratives that blur unified conceptualizations of both identity and national belonging. They address questions about women writers' attitudes towards risk and their willingness to change the status quo. They also explore the many personal and public forms in which agency manifests through risk-taking engagements; the ways in which women challenge the conventional wisdom about feminine reserve and aversion to danger; the multiplicity of seen and unforeseen consequences of risk taking; the all-too-often lack of recognition of female courage; the

overcoming of obstacles by taking risks and, frequently, the amelioration of women's lives.

For female writers risk is intrinsic to their act of writing autobiographically. Feelings of anxiety, fear, shame, pain and alienation, often surface when a woman decides to write an autobiographical account. Sometimes female authors publicly expose their uneasiness, some other times those feelings are imbedded in their narratives. Jennifer Willging's *Telling Anxiety* thus opens: "To desire to tell a story and the anxiety that sometimes accompanies such telling are forces that can leave their trace in the narrative text" (3). Willging departs from Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's claim that later twentieth century women writers have somewhat overcome the authorship's anguish and guilt of previous generations. She otherwise maintains that, particularly in French and French-Canadian narratives, anxiety is still present and thus retraceable in the writings of Marguerite Duras, Annie Ernaux, Nathalie Sarraute, and Anne Hébert.¹ Drawing from psychology, Willging describes anxiety as directly connected to desire and, consequently, as a force that can both induce and move with narration. When articulated through language and writing, she continues, psychoanalytic accounts sustain that anxiety can "diminish its destructive effects on the psyche" (3). However, if narrators, and frequently authors, believe that the act of telling fulfills a desire and even eases apprehension, Willging argues that "narrating can also *provoke* rather than alleviate anxiety," and anxiety, once elicited, "hinders rather than drives forward the narration" (4). Usually this happens when recounting is particularly painful or when there is an anticipation of "undesirable consequence" related with the disclosure (4). Willging also makes clear that the anxiety surfacing in narrative is a reflection of the one experienced in real life. Causes triggering anxiety are various; among them, are:

doubts about the very possibility of becoming an author in a persistently male-dominated society; fears about actually becoming one and suddenly being expected to assume the (unfamiliar) authority ... and finally, doubts about the *legitimacy*, as well as the desirability, of claiming such authority. (9)

Willging further contends that Duras, Ernaux, Sarraute, and Hébert believe in literature as a tool that, although imperfect, will advance their

¹ Willging argues that due to historical reasons, French and French-Canadian women have had a more difficult time than Anglophone women in assuming authorship. See 7-8.

understanding of life. More importantly, they believe in literature as a political instrument through which “hidden” realities should be made visible (15). Their anxiety, Willging clarifies, is not located in the lack of belief in language’s referentiality to the world, but in the anticipation of the responsibilities implied by authorship:

any anxieties they or their narrators experience while writing or narrating stem less from radical doubts about language’s capacity to gesture towards the world than, first, from doubts about their own ability to make language to do so, and second, from an apprehension of the *responsibility* that writing about the world entails. ... it is a double-edged anxiety produced first by the recognition of the *difficulty* of attempting to speak about or reveal some kind of reality in language, and second, by the recognition of the very *possibility* of such revelation. That is, the narrators of these texts (and often the authors behind them, I maintain) fear at the same time both success and failure in their endeavor to say something about themselves and the world. (14)

Because Willging distinguishes between anxiety and fear—the first being an anticipation of a danger and the second a reaction to a real danger—, in this quote she infers that anxiety originating from authorship is for women a feeling of being socially unfit. This anxiety, which is unrelated to their skills or success, is destined to linger lifelong in these authors’ lives. In *Autobiographics*, targeting the female writers’ social distress in assuming authorship, Leigh Gilmore sustains that the best tool women use to advocate their voice is by writing as close as possible to the truth: “authority is derived through autobiography’s proximity to the rhetoric of truth telling: the confession” (109). By striving to be accountable for verity, Gilmore insists, women are “highly ‘self’-conscious”; in fact, they become: “hyperconscious as the prisoners of the panopticon” (225).² In addition, in order to efficiently self-monitor the conformity of their writing to society, women authors “must be aware of what the dominant culture values and identifies as truth,” which suggests a reframing of their personal reality into a better socially-endorsed notion of truth (226). The dread image of women prisoners of their own self-imposed surveillance echoes Willging’s account of anxiety. A few years later, by studying women’s authorship in trauma accounts, Gilmore underscores the constraints dictated by self-representation’s traditional canons—“legalistic

² Gilmore refers to Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* argument on the panopticon—that is the structure envisioned by Jeremy Bentham of a circular prison with cells built around a central well from which prisoners cannot escape control—which engenders in prisoners an internalized self-surveillance.

definition of truth telling, its anxiety about invention, and its preference for the literal and verifiable" (*The Limits of Autobiography* 3). As an example of these limitations, she refers to the public discussion on truthfulness that the book *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* brought about. While pointing at the risk of threatening writers into silence, when publicly accusing them of a lie, Gilmore notices how this is: "one reason why not all writers choose autobiography as the mode in which to tell stories of personal pain" (5).

If writing autobiographically is risky in itself, Gilmore further underscores the authors' vulnerability when trauma is at the center of their narrative and thus contends that readership has indeed a paramount role, since: "The truthfulness of knowledge about the self and trauma as it arises in relation to self-representation immediately confronts the issue of judgment" (145). She concludes by encouraging criticism to focus on the how the truth is rendered, rather than on whether one is telling the truth. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson likewise propose a shift in the way readership should approach autobiography. Instead of evaluating on a base of a true-false pattern, they suggest an approach that allows for the readers' interpretation and empathy. Understood in this way, the space that autobiographical narrative creates is one in which: "intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of life" (13). In the same vein, Alison Rice encourages an empathic readership. She understands the intents of seven colonial and postcolonial women self-narratives as ones that call for a new type of reader, and that "compel us to open ourselves to the multiple truths that are present in their text" (1).

In *Women Taking Risks in Contemporary Autobiographical Narratives*, authors engage in different ways with their readers. Some of them actively interact by means of television, theatre, blogs, or newspapers; others prefer to use narrative strategies demanding the reader's participation in their creative process. All narrators, and the authors behind them, confront fear by exploring, acknowledging, and revisiting different types of threats. On the one hand, by writing about dangerous actions, the authors of this collection take risks while organizing them into a more or less fragmented narrative. Through this belated self-reflective practice they therefore acquire a better understanding of the self and the other. In fact, there is a personal and a social effect of the experience narrated in autobiographical writing. On a personal level, the distance created by the narrative enables the author to look from a new angle and to use this knowledge as a means of self-growth and change. Given that autobiography is concerned with the writer

and her relationships, disclosures and personal reflections will necessarily implicate a further reading and interpretation of differences shared in relationships. Hélène Cixous goes further by affirming that self-narratives indeed originate from the other:

L'autre sous toutes ses formes me donne *Je*. C'est à l'occasion de l'autre que Je m'aperçois; ou que Je *me prends à*: réagir, choisir, refuser, accepter. C'est l'autre qui fait mon portrait. Toujours. (Calle-Gruber and Cixous 23)

On the other hand, this self transformation, which the action of facing fears entails, needs to be understood as a non-linear movement, often negotiating with feelings of uncertainty and solitude. In "Violence de l'autobiographie," Assia Djebar subtly distinguishes between the violence of history and the inner violence:

la recherche historique ne met pas en question ce que j'appelle la violence intérieure. La violence de l'histoire, quand l'on écrit, on l'écrit comme une mise en scène et c'est contradictoire ... Ce n'est pas cette violence qui est la plus terrible, c'est celle qui est liée à un combat avec soi-même. (93)

Djebar seems to touch on the alienation of the self originating from the gap between the intimate self that unfolded during the writing process and the socially constructed self. One might infer that this new awareness of having betrayed her self could bring sorrow into the present.

Taking risks then does not necessarily imply either the extinction of fears or the attainment of an emotional stability. It is a stance against the immobility that fear is able to produce and an example of political acts embedded in daily life, distinct from rhetorical understanding of heroism. However, because risk is a word whose variability depends on location, culture, gender, class and individual state of minds, in what terms can risk be defined and measured within self-narratives? Should the threat to life suffered in one's existence be differently valued from other types of threats? Before answering those questions, the following section will give us some perspective on how the notion of risk has been studied in fields other than literature.

Studies on Risk

Risk is a popular and controversial scholarly topic. There is an abundance of research that examines risk as something that needs definition and, once defined, as a factor which can be addressed and mitigated. Medical researchers publish articles with titles like "Defining

Risk Drinking” and “Perspectives on Risk and Obesity” where the declared intent is “harm reduction” or “preventing, identifying, and modifying risk” and to “increase safety by predicting and averting risk” (Dawson 144; McGlone and Davies 13). In economic studies, investment strategy focuses on making “risks forecasts” and “risk preferences” which are meant to assist an investor in accumulating money and avoiding its loss (Menchero, Wang and Orr 40; Falsetta and Tuttle 483). Security professionals analyze “what constitute individual risk factors for terrorism” and attempt to influence fears of cataclysm by mapping “nuclear power plant risk perceptions” (Monahan 168; Hung-Chih and Tzu-Wen 668). And yet, these lines of research, that are supposed to focus on measurement of risk as well as on ways to reduce and therefore most safely take risk, bluntly disagree on how risk should generally be approached and identified. Contention is even more manifest when one considers what factors should be measured when evaluating the increase or decrease of risk’s perception.

In fact, if some critics notice how risk, intended as exposure to uncertainty, is in someway not fully avoidable and “has always accompanied the development of human society,” scientists tend to focus on control over nature by means of technology (Taylor-Gooby and Zinn 1). Among recent debates on the limits and dangers of societal rationalizations of risks, Iain Wilkinson maintains that despite Western sociology’s use of technologies and rational discourses applied to the social and natural world, a “politically neutral” interpretation of risk is impossible since: “risk always gives voice to positions of social bias, cultural commitment and political preference” (57). Along the same line, psychologist Paul Slovic highlights the inadequacy and even the distortion of the scientific approach to risk assessment, since “risk is socially constructed,” and “Whoever controls the definition of risk controls the rational solution to the problem at hand” (699). Gabe Mythen and Sandra Walklate too, uncover the danger of scientific manipulation and sustain that “discourses of risks can be utilized in the strategic interests of government” (5). Against the misuse of rational reasoning, Wilkinson quotes German sociologist Max Weber, who attested the paradox encountered by science when dealing with the irrational force of life:

The problem of suffering is liable to be encountered with increasing intensity where everyday life is conducted under the expectation that nature and society will conform to the dictates of rationalization. (cited in Wilkinson 33)

For Wilkinson scientific accounts of risk not only might do little against the unexpected irruptions of life but are potentially dangerous in that they create the illusion of security, while diverting attention from the original goal of risks assessment: the progressive reduction of social suffering.

Since the response to risk is essentially a response to a menacing, threatening event, other studies in the field of psychology situated emotions at the center of the risk analysis. Sander L. Gilman explains Western cultures' reactions to threats as a response to fear that manifests by externalizing and displacing the threat onto the other, the latter intended as the non-indigenous. Hélène Joffe carries on Gilman's research and points to the symmetry between Western and non-Western cultural responses to threat in times of crises. Joffe acknowledges how similarities between societies need to be tempered by looking at power differences; nonetheless she notices how: "Like dominant groups, non-hegemonic groups have 'others' whom they link to threat," such as the foreigner or women (27). This continuity between Western and non-Western responses to crises lies in what Joffe defines as the human "need for control" (29):

The human way of returning to a state of functioning, in the face of disaster, is by making meaning, making structure of terror and chaos. People are motivated to feel safe, to experience the environment as stable and predictable. ... a shared set of meanings of the event is established by groups, reflected in their shared beliefs and enshrined in the rituals and symbols which organize an event. Fairy tales are particularly good examples of shared sets of meanings which lie at the root of many people's understanding and experience of terror. (31)

Often centered on the fear of a loss of safety, the author maintains, fairy tales are children's favorites because they show a way of mastering terror.

Joffe's remark about the educational and ethical power of tales is testament to the centrality of literature as the ideal art form for capturing the essence of human emotions. And yet, the diversity of practical approaches to the subject of risk stands in contrast to the field of literature, where risk is largely eschewed by scholarly research. Susan Mizruchi made precisely this argument, observing in 2010 that "while the study of risk is fairly advanced in other fields, it is still new in literary studies" (111). Péter Hajdu's article "Status of Literature in the Age of Global Risks" brings theory to practical application in cultural studies. Yet he nevertheless underlines the disconnect between risk and literary production when he finds himself forced to ask whether our post-9/11 world's "awareness of being threatened situates literature or high culture in general as a peripheral and childish game" (165). Perhaps then, the

scarcity of studies linking literature to risk derives from the characteristic of immediacy intrinsic in the nature of risk. Frequently associated with physical safety and fast measures of intervention, risk seems to contravene the belatedness implicit in the act of writing.

A few studies nevertheless should be mentioned. In *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Sharon D. Welch engages with both risk and literature. She uses literature not as an exemplification of risks taken but as an inspirational point of departure for the development of her ethic of risk. She targets a specific threat, the nuclear war, and against it advances a feminist ethic of "responsible action," drawing from the words of wisdom of the literary tradition of novels by African-American women authors (23). A more recent example of risk-centered literature is Karen A. Waldron, Laura M. Labatt and Janice H. Brazil's *Risk, Courage and Women. Contemporary Voices in Prose and Poetry*. This rich compilation contains international narratives, essays and poems written in English, crossing class, age and race divides. The editors thematically organized eighty pieces of writing around the subject of the source of courage. The six categories of the anthology—Sustenance for Living, Faith in the Unknown, the Courage of Choice, Seams of our Lives, the Real Self, and Crossing Borders—illustrate the reasons that propelled women to engage with risk. Despite its lack of literary textual analysis, the anthology presents writings focused on women's reflections on both courage and real life risks.³ In addition, by distinguishing six sources of courage, Waldron, Labatt and Brazil outline a variety of risks as well.

The majority of studies briefly reviewed privilege the analysis of risk assessment as the more effective way to contribute to the humanistic goal of decreasing and preventing human suffering. Within this optic, risk is intended as a potential threat that needs to be controlled. Differently from these lines of research, Welch as well as Waldron, Labatt and Brazil associate risk to courage and to social responsibility. Intended in this way, risk is investigated as a human exposure to danger whose effect is to step out of a comfort zone and to envision new relationships and ways of living. Eventually, this exposure might contribute to self-growth and might also help building a meaningful communitarian sense of participation.

³ The collection has a commendable practical aim, too. In the preface, one can read that all net proceeds from the book sales will be donated to the *WINGS* foundation—*Women Involved in Nurturing, Giving and Sharing*—, a non-profit organization that provides free health care to uninsured women with breast cancer.