Women Taking Risks in Contemporary Autobiographical Narratives

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Edited by

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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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The idea of this book stems from a session proposal presented at the *Women in French* Conference in February 2012, held at the Arizona State University. Because this book would not have been possible without the cultural and literary debate that the subject risk arose during that conference, we would like to thank first, the association *Women in French* for its engagement with scholars and for its keen support of the study of French and Francophone women authors. We express our gratitude and deep regards to Distinguished Research Professor of Comparative Literature Ronald L. Bogue, Taylor Professor of French Studies and Comparative Literature Dr. Adelaide M. Russo and Professor of French Studies and Comparative Literature Dr. Jack Yaeger for their encouragement and suggestions. We would also like to convey our thanks to the School of Graduate Studies of Salem State University for funding the conference's participation and to the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences and the Chair of our Department of World Languages and Literatures for granting us a course release to help accomplishing this project. A special thanks to our contributors whose enthusiasm and energy inspired us along the process.

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.

Risk, Courage and Fear

Women Taking Risks in Contemporary Autobiographical Narratives focus on different types of risk as an opportunity for women authors to take action and to fight against personal and social immobility and stagnation. Risk is thus understood in this collection as the authors' personal responses to a social stimulus that imply reflection on life happenings and the renegotiation of the terms and forms of these events by means of writing. One result of these renegotiations is that female authors increasingly "control" their risks by becoming both the agent and the subject of their autobiographical accounts. In fact, the ways in which they reflect on and respond to events, to deepen understanding of both life and themselves, undoubtedly mark a place of agency. Moreover, granted that all forms of autobiography define an authorial space of internal and external conflicts as well as one of interactions between author and reader, in this collection, contributors are consistently inspired by feminist and post-colonial theories on autobiography. One of the most recurrent critiques of these studies has been the inadequacy of the category to represent the diversity and multiplicity of forms in which autobiography manifests. In fact, in addition to the 2001 Smith and Watson's classification of fifty-two types of autobiography, new definitions are still emerging—some of them even within this collection. This is the reason why Smith and Watson prefer to describe autobiographical accounts as a "historically situated practice of self-representation" or, more recently Leigh Gilmore wrote that autobiography is an "ongoing and often contentious engagement with humanistic discourses of identity and truth" (14; "Agency Without Mastery" 83).

If we therefore understand risk within the autobiographical narratives of this collection as the narrators and authors' choice that might have potentiality for changes in life, then the notion of courage, as the ability or strength to do something in face of fear or pain, also needs further analysis. Swedish philosopher Per Bauhn's *The Value of Courage* opens new perspectives on the subject. Bauhn interprets courage as a means to recover the human sense of being an autonomous agent, in a society that increasingly depersonalizes human interactions. Highly conscious of the ill-omened associations between self-sufficiency and individualism, Bauhn understands the autonomy that courage may enhance as a way to promote both: "the personal good of the agent" and "the common good of human

communities" (9).[4] He also emphasizes the interpersonal qualities of courage in its function of enabling the agent in both private and public life:

> The often ignored fact is that courage is by no means incompatible with the "softer" virtues of compassion and empathy; on the contrary, courage may be fuelled by one's perception of other people being in need of one's support. (8)

Avoiding the stereotype of bravery as an exclusively male quality, Bauhn brings new values into play that affect both the self and the community. He argues that courage is an essential component to both the advancing of the personal and of the common good; Bauhn also disrupts rhetorical associations of courage with both heroism and danger. He disputes Douglas N. Walton and James D. Wallace's definitions of courage; the first defining a courageous act as one in which the agent "overcomes great danger or difficulty," the second, more moderately, interpreting courage as "the agent's *belief* that what she is about to do is dangerous to her" (*The Value of Courage* 30).[5] Rather than danger, Bauhn endorses the centrality of fear and interprets courage as the ability to confront fear and "to *do* something in spite of being afraid" (40). Courage is thus understood in terms of agency inhibited by fear, "courage enables the agent to resist fear and to that extent also enables her to remain and conceive of herself as an agent" (27). As a consequence, according to Bauhn courageous are all actions that resist fear, "regardless of whether there really is something dangerous or not to confront" (30). Additionally, in his understanding of threats, without denying the unquestionable difference between physical threats—"wars, plagues, famines, the abuse of tyrants, and the torments of hard physical labour"—and psychological afflictions—"depression, alienation, and lack of meaning"—, Bauhn focuses on the latter to show how they too are powerful deterrent to agency:

> These internal deficiencies constitute a threat to the good life by undermining the individual's confidence in herself as an agent having goals worth achieving and as possessing the capacity to realize them. … a person's sense of autonomy may be endangered not only by adverse social

[4] Bauhn retraces the unfortunate historical continuity between the myth of the hero, which developed during the Victorian era, and the explosion of the two World Wars, during which the "cult of heroic self-sacrifice" was promoted (23). See 22-28 and Chapter 8 "Heroism and Courage" 137-166.

[5] Douglas N. Walton, *Courage: A Philosophical Investigation.* University of California Press, 1986; James D. Wallace, *Virtues and Vices.* Cornell University Press, 1978.

> or natural conditions, but also by her lack of confidence in her powers of agency. Especially prominent here are various kinds of fear, which may either completely paralyse the agent in certain contexts, or at least severely diminish her capacity for agency.[6] (9, 26)

Bauhn maintains that it is from the individual fear of being an outcast that originates a form of courage, the "*courage of conviction*," which is able to drive the individual to social action by helping the most vulnerable in society (45).

Finally, it is worthy to notice how, both Jennifer Willging and Bauhn, mention in their analysis studies on *Prozac* and discuss the validity of anti-anxiety drugs in contemporary society.[7] While Bauhn links these medications to "a widespread preoccupation with avoiding risks," Willging notices how in both the United States and France the majority of users are women (18). She further proceeds even more boldly and argues that anti-anxiety drugs: "anesthetize women to the injustice of their still less than equal status and the constraints of the roles that continue to be 'prescribed' for them" (11). If we go back to our original question—in what terms risk can be defined and measured within self-narratives—, Willging's study of authorial anxiety and Bauhn's understanding of courage, fear and threats allow us to better interpret the variety of risks presented in this collection. Taking risks and confronting fear should then be considered as the narrators and authors' expression of agency that might have substantial impact in both their private and public lives.

Chapters

This collection comprises fourteen chapters that are organized into three parts: *Risky Disclosures*, *Risky Leaps*, and *Life as Risk.* In the first part, *Risky Disclosures*, the five essays variously deal with the process of revealing secrets and resist self-disclosure and self-definition. This well-known practice that implies the simultaneous interaction between covering and uncovering, is described by Irène Assiba d'Almeida as often

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[6] Bauhn distinguishes between two different kinds of fear: the fear of failure and the fear of personal transience, which involves the fear of being socially outcast, what he calls the "fear of social ostracism, as well as a fear that one's life is insignificant, meaningless, making no difference whatsoever in the world" (29). The latter, Bauhn observes, is self-reinforcing; it "breeds a passivity, which in turn generates a lowered self-esteem that reinforces her passivity, but now supported by her belief that she cannot make a difference" (30).

[7] Willging 10-11, Bauhn 10.

generating a third movement, "that of 'recovering'" (33). In chapter one Trudy Agar examines the beloved others who appear in autobiographical texts written by Assia Djebar and Nina Bouraoui in order to evaluate the risks posed by such encounters, taking into consideration the socio-political contexts in which the texts were written. Agar argues that their illicit passions expose the autobiographical selves to certain risks. Some risks are metaphysical, and operate in a relationship between the self and the other, depending on the self's engagement with the body, the face and ethical or socio-cultural norms. Other risks are socially determined, and the authors' Algerian and French cultural contexts therefore play an important role in the nature of these risks and in how and why the passions are inscribed in the autobiographies. In the second chapter, Marzia Caporale explores Annie Ernaux's autobiographical memoir, *L'usage de la photo*. Caporale shows that Ernaux's text mixes both private and public discourse by finding inspiration in two unexpected events that delineated the narrator's personal history in 2003: her romance with a much younger man, Marc Marie, who co-authors the book, and her simultaneous diagnosis of breast cancer and resulting chemotherapy treatments. Ernaux is shown to challenge autobiographical expectations by including fourteen photos that are not images of the co-authors, but are instead shots of discarded clothing and other results of their love making. The presence of disease in the text is similarly contradictory as the book is one of love celebrating life while the cancer is a threat to its continuation. Such contradiction is further emphasized by Ernaux's representation of the body which, while essential to the sexual act and the cancer narrative, is purposely hidden from sight in the photographs. Christopher Hogarth's essay in chapter three argues that in Ken Bugul's novel *Mes hommes à moi*, the author has created a character that is far more at peace with herself than any other before. To do this, Hogarth explains, Bugul engages in games of gender and genre that offend both traditional masculine and feminist sensibilities with fierce forthrightness regarding sexuality and colonial legacies. Bugul explores the need to relate her own story by telling the stories of others and to do this she must listen to French and storytelling in French (and by French*men*) before departing on her own voyage into the self. In chapter four Noelle Giguere examines the risks of self-definition in Marie NDiaye's *Autoportrait en vert* where a series of female characters distinguished by the color green add a threatening air to the protagonist's search for self. Giguere argues that these women facilitate NDiaye's exploration of the autobiographical genre. Their presence demonstrates how the author takes risks in her self-portrait, constantly negotiating between the complete dispersion of identity and the

paradoxical agency that comes with abandoning predetermined ways of understanding and defining the self. The last chapter in this part is by Cathy Jellenik who looks at Annie Ernaux's breaking silence in regard to abortion in *L'Evénement*. Jellenik shows that Ernaux's autobiographical text is a revisiting of the subject that she had previously addressed in fiction. According to Jellenik, the confrontation with silence and the unsayable has never been so present in Ernaux's work and thus the impotence of the linguistic system in which she works demands that in order to elucidate the silenced, Ernaux must take the risk of leaving the comfort of fiction to try autobiography.

The second part, *Risky Leaps*, focuses on the authors' process of springing forward from previous social or personal impasses. This coming into a new being is subtly welcome in narratives but also differently marked by painful reflections on the woman's sense of solitude and being unfit for society. In chapter six Natalie Edwards looks at Virginie Despentes's *King Kong Théorie* in relation to Hélène Cixous's "Le Rire de la Méduse." Edwards argues that Despentes's theoretical work is a twenty-first century autobiographical manifesto that builds from Cixous's essay. Instead of comparing the two texts, Edwards uses Cixous to reveal the intricacies of Despentes's approach to the feminine condition and thus demonstrate how much both feminism and autobiography have changed in the thirty years that separate the two texts. Chapter seven is an analysis of Pied-Noir women's confrontation with Algerian memory. Amy L. Hubbell examines both Marie Cardinal's repeated rewriting of Algeria as well as the collective autobiography *Quatre sœurs: Hier, en Algérie, aujourd'hui en France*. Hubbell addresses the difficulty each of these women encountered in putting words to experience. This was particularly true in regard to Algeria where confronting the past with a critical eye meant risking their conceptions of France, Algeria, and personal relationships. While their narratives challenge established ideas of the past, Hubbell finds the things that they do not say to be equally, if not more, revealing. In chapter eight Adrienne Angelo explores the role of the father in Marie Nimier's *La Reine du silence* and Clémence Boulouque's *Mort d'un silence*. Angelo argues that the paternal in both texts complicates them as autobiographies because each author, in her own way, must confront the silence produced by the premature death of a famous father. As authors, they must deal with personal identity in relation to such trauma, but they also must confront silence and secrets that have made them reticent to write. Despite this, Angelo argues, both authors create autobiographies that emphasize how breaking silence in the name of the father is capable of producing a certain catharsis. Chapter nine is Anna Rocca's analysis of

autobiographical work by Moroccan authors Leïla Abouzeid and Houria Boussejra. Rocca argues that both authors participate in public dialog in order to reveal to readers the power struggles behind deceitful interpretations of modernity. She contends that their writing denounces the exploitative and corrupted rationalities of colonial, religious, national, secular, patriarchal, and western feminist discourses. To replace these ideas, according to Rocca, Abouzeid and Bossejra propose their own version of modern and reassess what needs to be improved in women's lives and society at large. Therefore, writes Rocca, that to be a truly modern woman is, for these authors, the greatest risk because it requires the force to challenge all systems and reexamine women in regard to family, community, and country. The second part's last chapter is by Névine El Nossery. El Nossery writes about Arab women challenging the rules of their own culture and breaking into the public sphere in Malika Mokeddem's *La transe des insoumis* and Fatima Mernissi's *Rêves de femmes. Une enfance au harem*. Furthermore, argues El Nossery, these texts serve to re-examine national identity in regard to the post-independence nation-state as well as transnationally in an increasingly globalized world where the distance between local and worldwide is often difficult to decipher.

The third part, *Life as Risk*, engages with four authors whose life has been particularly characterized by danger and courage, but also, for some of them, by deprivation and loss. The four chapters underscore the authors' resilience, their ability to sustain a great deal of pain and to sublimate it into a powerful exercise of public stance. Chapter eleven deals with the travels of the *Fiancée du danger*, Titaÿna (Élisabeth Sauvy). Jean Anderson argues that this female adventure journalist acted in response to her historical period's social roles by attempting to create a space between conflicting codes of masculinity and femininity. The boldness of her adventures was not a simple substitution of the male for the female, but instead was the result of two seemingly contradictory discourses: one of daring (hardness) and one of femininity (softness). Anderson demonstrates that Titaÿna's writing either neutralized gender or even asserted femininity to assuage reader expectations while at the same time the author's rebelliousness challenged these traditional roles. This paradox, argues Anderson, is a reflection of her embodied and disembodied presence as a privileged witness at the edge of civilization. Jane E. Evans looks at Malika Mokeddem's *Mes hommes* in chapter twelve. She argues that the text narrates the story of a woman whose adolescence was shaped by traditional Islamic culture and the missing emotional support of her parents. These two influences, argues Evans, brought her to favor a more

sensual lifestyle and self-actualized relationship with the world. Evans positions Mokeddem as a voluntary risk-taker who embraces the possibility of harm as a way to grow and create a personal sense of identity. The thirteenth chapter is by Boukary Sawadogo. It looks at the life of Thérèse Parise Bernis as told in both her autobiography *Parise: Souvenirs encombrants de la Guadeloupe* and the documentary film *Souvenirs encombrants d'une femme de ménage* by Dani Kouyaté. Sawadogo argues that the subject's story deals with risk in regard to women's attitudes towards venture and their willingness to make courageous decisions in order to ameliorate their lives. As a result, writes Sawadogo, Thérèse is not only a person who takes risks, but the fact that she is a woman also means that she incarnates a risk for the male community in Point-à-Pitre. The collection's final chapter is by Isabelle Favre and deals with testimony in regard to Rwandan-born Swiss-citizen Maggy Corrêa. Corrêa's decision, according to Favre, to travel to her homeland at the height of the genocide in an attempt to save her mother is not just the story of an incredible journey, but is connected to Jacques Derrida's notion of *sacramentum*. Favre's essay explores not only the author's book *Tutsie, etc*, but also her description of *Les séances extraordinaires* of the United Nations held May 24th and 25th, 1994, in Geneva.

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