



## Women Modernists and the Legacies of Risk: An Introduction

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## Women Modernists and the Legacies of Risk: An Introduction

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### ABSTRACT

This introductory essay for the *Australian Feminist Studies* special issue on Modernist Women and Risk examines the changing fortunes of risk for feminist aesthetic and political work. It considers how risk in the work of modernist women intellectuals, writers and artists prompts us to imagine what it might mean in the twenty-first century to ‘risk anything’?

### KEYWORDS

Modernism; risk; feminism; modernist studies; trauma culture; aesthetic experimentation

## I

The pervasive association of ‘risk’ with a neoliberal agenda of individual responsibility and the calculated governance of our everyday micro-pathologies might well suggest that the concept of risk is now far removed from the aesthetic and political ethos of modernism. Premised on the idea of novelty, uncertainty, disruption, and reinvention, risk, for modernism represented an almost indispensable condition of creative production although risk in the work and lives of modernist women, let alone queer modernist women, presents another layer of complexity to the broader contours of modernist experimentation, since the very condition of creative production was in itself a gendered enterprise in the early decades of the twentieth century: ideologically, aesthetically and materially. As we have moved to ever more liquid forms of modernity, risk is no longer associated with an automatic negation and tearing down as the precondition for social, political and aesthetic renewal. Rather risk has become something to be managed via the rhetoric of individual harm and grievance as a bulwark against endemic uncertainty and precarity. The liquidity of our world, felt through superdiversity, intensified forms of digital communication, financialisation, and the new challenges that they pose, has meant that we are all now risk adverse rather than risk-takers in ways that Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck perhaps never imagined. With this in mind, the historical valency of risk in relation to modernist women’s literary, artistic, and intellectual enterprises might be a surprisingly fertile optic with which to not simply scour the extant ruins of modernism, to borrow T J Clarke’s well-worn formulation (1999), but to illuminate the fortunes and legacies of ‘risk’ for feminist political and intellectual work in the present.

While ‘new modernist studies’ has grappled with the anodyne institutionalisation of the very risk that so readily attached itself to modernist experimentation, its interrogation of ‘bad modernisms’ often played out as sibling rivalry, with the agile, attention-seeking

younger upstart destined to eclipse the conscientious, and somewhat earnest first born (old modernist studies) (see Mao and Walkowitz 2006). But beyond the terms of good and bad modernisms, old and new modernist studies, the idea of risk as a critical or emancipatory category has, in the early twenty-first century, lost something of its pizzazz. In striking ways, risk has come to be supplanted by a 'trauma culture' that has rendered psychic pain one of the dominant discourses of political and aesthetic culture in the postwar period (Kaplan 2005; Luckhurst 2008; Rothe 2011; Cvetkovich 2012; Halberstam 2014). Trauma culture's more recent mutation into the 'micro-aggression' and a 'call out' culture surely serves to further tame political or aesthetic risk, while at times coming dangerously close to a 'master morality'. As Brown's cautionary tale about the dangers of 'identity as injury' showed us, 'wounded attachments' all too easily fix identity in ways that foreclose agile political opposition and self-determination, individual or collective (Brown 1995). What might this mean for aesthetic experimentation and how might modernist women's investment in risk serve to remind us of the stakes of our own political will?

The modernist feminism produced by Katherine Mansfield, Mina Loy, Emma Goldman and others in the early decades of the twentieth century, was inflected with a quasi-Nietzschean individualism that stressed exceptional strengths of character and mind, while being deeply suspicious of a discourse of rights, with its ontological essentialism ('I am') closing off a more expansive discourse of freedom ('I want this for us') (Brown 1995, 75). Feminist modernists, in their pursuit of new forms of aesthetic and political freedom were acutely aware of the paradoxes of risk, paradoxes which for Brown have increasingly come to make us uncomfortable and anxious:

The pursuit of political freedom is necessarily ambivalent ... because it requires that we surrender the conservative pleasure of familiarity, insularity, and routine for investment in a more open horizon of possibility and sustained willingness to risk identity, both collective and individual. (1995, 25)

While Brown penned her critique of freedom and political rights more than two decades ago, her insights are acutely prescient if not indicative of a longer history of feminism's struggle with the ways in which feminist political work risks reifying the very structures and identities it otherwise contests. Emma Goldman perhaps typified this kind of risk of collective and individual identity, forging her political career via a form of anarchist feminism that defies ready-made feminist categories, then and now. And an intimate life forged through her advocacy of free love and a repudiation of monogamy, in spite of the unruly reality of her 'uncontrollable passions', which have come to either represent the 'failure' of her political vision or its domestication (Hemmings 2018). As Clare Hemmings (2018) astutely notes, sexual freedom in these terms represents 'a volatile site of uncertain promise, a place of inevitably flawed struggle for newness that may precisely be its political value and enduring appeal', something she claims Goldman knew all too well (63).

## II

Opening this special issue of *Australian Feminist Studies*, guest editors Louise Mayhew and Helen Rydstrand explore risk at the site of scholarly engagement, eschewing the formal address of the academic essay in place of the personalised, vernacular intimacy of a

conversation. While the ficto-critical mode has a strong legacy in feminist and cultural studies scholarly work, the conversation format here reminds us of the importance of intellectual pleasure derived from the intimacy of scholarly friendship and the exchange of ideas. It is a formal experiment in dialogue that avoids the strained solipsism of self-narration (sometimes a risk in ficto-critical writing) or the implicit hierarchies of expertise of traditional academic forms of writing, and celebrates instead the shared attachments and perils that mark the process of collaboration, whether through the thrill of the *objet trouvé* driving intellectual research or the destabilising uncertainties of the doctoral experience. Bringing together the sentimental and the scholarly, the point of departure for this conversation (and friendship) is the gift of a feminist poster, one that memorialises the legacy of risk across generations of feminist creative and intellectual work.

The poster in question, by Anne Sheridan of Harridan Screenprinters, records Katherine Mansfield's injunction, to herself or her reader, in a journal entry on the 14th October, 1922, less than three months before she died: 'Risk! Risk Anything! Care no more for the opinion of others, for those voices. Do the hardest thing on earth for you. Act for yourself. Face the truth'. Like Mina Loy's 'Feminist Manifesto' (1914/1996), which urged women to 'Be brave' in the face of 'the Wrench' that comes with the psychological upheaval of emotional and material independence, the declarative voice in Mansfield's journal excerpt strikes a tone of stridency and self-determination. These are the voices that marked a volatile transatlantic feminist individualism, even as they recorded the very real strain in women's lives as they were lived in the early twentieth century, not least of which was Mansfield's complicated and unconventional emotional life and her ill health. Her injunction to 'risk anything' and 'care no more for the opinions of others' admonishes the complacency of the status quo even as it lays bare the struggle for life itself.

Like many feminist scholars before them, Mayhew and Rydstrand eloquently grapple with the tension between personal experience and professional expectation, noting that the use of the personal voice and women's feminised experiences have not always been conducive to professional performance. While the personal has been and remains an important mode of feminist political intervention, the personal also now risks being co-opted into a neoliberal individualism that rewards self-promotion and a 'lean-in' ethos targeted at personal gain or indeed a 'call-out' culture that seeks social change via forms of tribalism at the expense of coalition building around broad socio-political structural reform. The feminist poster collectives that thrived in the 1970s and 80s, of which Harridan Screenprinters are exemplary, reveal the feminist collective as an important political tool that managed to combine feminist conviction, creative labour, and a sense of humour. We glimpse something of this shared labour of political and creative enterprise in Mayhew and Rydstrand's conversation; each speaks for the self through an awareness of the other, or rather the perspective (personal and disciplinary) that colours feminist scholarship as a generative dialogue. The conversation form here also pays homage to the innovative methods of feminist and queer research – oral histories, archival research, interviews, anecdote – that bring us closer to our object of study if not animating feminist history itself, as an imagined dialogue between the past and present.

Risk for modernist women invariably involved going against the grain of both aesthetic and professional norms. In Catherine Speck's consideration of the work of the wartime

artists, the American, Edna Reindel and the Australian, Sybil Craig, the risk of belatedness hovers over the work of these artists, by virtue of working in a realist mode against the rage for late modernist abstraction. As professionally employed war artists recording the wartime work of women in the traditionally masculine domains of aircraft and munitions factories and shipbuilding, Speck reveals how our received art histories rarely capture the composite material conditions (in this case the exigencies of war and women's newfound professional roles in traditionally masculine domains) that shaped art practices beyond the often retrospective categories of period style. Through the reframing of the work of Reindel and Craig as 'inter/modern', Speck draws out the complexity of aesthetic style, of both of these artists, beyond its presumed 'realist' surface. Speck's framework thus complicates how we read their images, independent of, and perhaps against the grain of, a 'specular military economy of visibility' that might otherwise miss the political efficacy of their work.

Like Reindel and Craig, Gretel Adorno née Karplus finds herself among a world of men, where professional life involved serving the Frankfurt School's critical endeavours as secretary along with the demands of ill-health and loneliness. In Tamlyn Avery's essay, Gretel Adorno is both 'sacrificial lamb' and perceptive amanuensis, holding together the intellectual threads of the Institute of Social Research *and* the domestic affairs of the Adorno's home office, which, after the Institute's move to L.A. attracted a steady flow of émigré visitors. And if Adorno's exacting standards of hospitality in *Minima Moralia* are anything to go by, the pressures of domestic conviviality would have been onerous (1951/2005). In spite of Karplus's avowed dislike of housework, for Avery, this is no 'vicarious career', instead it is a form of secretarial labour that helped to shape the production of the Frankfurt School's work in meaningful ways. In revisiting overlooked 'writers' (Avery's term) such as Karplus, and in restoring the figure of the secretary to her rightful place in twentieth century textual labour history, Avery positions Gretel Karplus as 'a beacon radiating over the complex social relations that reside in the "shadows" of individual genius in acts of writing'. While Karplus certainly complicates the gendered divisions of textual labour that relegate secretarial function to perfunctory usefulness, Avery's essay prompts us to wonder about her intellectual ambition beyond making 'fair copy' for Adorno and co. A feminist engagement with an imaginary archive of Karplus's intellectual ambition might remind us of the limitations of Marxist theory's powers of resurrection, having failed to fully rescue Gretel from the 'shadows' of Adorno's footnotes and acknowledgements.

Shadows also figure in the estranging twilight world of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, a novel that although once marginal to literary modernism (in spite of T.S. Eliot's enthusiasm) has come to occupy the dual honour as a lesbian and queer literary classic and a classic of modernism albeit in ways that are 'emblematic and eccentric' (Glavey 2009, 750). Monique Wittig (1983), writing about Barnes's notorious textual obliquity, described it as 'out-of-the-corner-of-the-eye perception' that reflected Barnes's fear of being claimed as a 'lesbian writer' (66). For Wittig, Barnes typifies the contention that a text by a minority writer is only effective if it succeeds in making the minority point of view universal: 'Writing a text which has homosexuality amongst its themes is a gamble. It is taking a risk ... [that] sees one of its parts taken for a whole' (65). For Wittig, Barnes's political force ('political action') is located at the level of style, although she recognises that Barnes's battle as a writer was fought across two fronts: 'the formal level with the questions being debated at that moment in literary history, and on the conceptual level against the that-goes-

without-saying of the straight mind' (67). In taking up the theme of 'negative perception' in *Nightwood* for this special issue, Carissa Foo contemplates the role of 'a counterintuitive way of seeing that challenges naturalised, analytical perception' which she suggests reflects Barnes's concern with what Daniela Caselli identifies as 'the problem of legibility'. The skewed and fractured visions in Barnes's novel are, for Foo, emblematic of a queerness that 'estranges the women from themselves, the lover from the beloved, and also the reader from the text', reinforcing the novel's psychosexual incongruities in ways that reflect queer's 'disruptive and ... "unlocatable quality"' (Love, as quoted in Foo). Wittig's own essay on Barnes bears out similar incongruities of critique in so far as she identifies Barnes's achievement as a writer in terms of making 'the minority point of view universal' whilst still 'writing with the point of view of the lesbian' (64). It is no wonder, then, that for Wittig, Barnes's entire oeuvre 'detonates like a bomb where there has been nothing before it' (66), perhaps demonstrating the curious volatility in the way Barnes has been read.

Wittig's contention that literary style should be political is exemplified by Kathy Acker's enduring assault on narrative form. As a writer, performer, teacher, and neo-avant-garde counter-culture feminist, Acker could be said to have personified risk in both art and life but more than that she carried over modernism's investment in both stylistic and political forms of risk in ways that remind us of what is at stake when we read modernist or indeed feminist authors. As a reader I became hooked on Acker from the age of 18, when I first encountered *Blood and Guts in High School*. While over the years I have come to read Acker differently, I'm still struck by how uncomfortable the writing makes us feel even as it seems to act as a contagion for feminist fearlessness. What does it mean to confess a deep attachment to literary or other works of art? As Rita Felski has recently suggested, the traditional disciplines of literary studies and art history have been reticent in exploring our attachments to literary or art objects, fearful that our affective investments in works of art risk evacuating all critical acumen. But for Felski, attachment involves not simply identification, but also attunement and interpretation so that attending to a phenomenology of attachment might open up the way aesthetic objects come to have intense meaning in our lives, and in ways that might secure insight and critical depth (2019). Similarly, Clare Hemmings has demonstrated that our affective investments in our critical objects (in her case Emma Goldman) helps to produce modes of feminist storytelling that offer more generous accounts of the ambivalences that shape the life and work of our feminist predecessors.

Acker's work traded on intimacy and personal disclosure in striking ways although we couldn't always be sure that what we were getting was some straightforward semblance of 'the truth'. Like a number of modernist women writers and artists before her (Zora Neale Hurston, Leonora Carrington, H.D., Ella Deloria), Acker practiced what Alice Gambrell (1997) refers to as an aesthetics of 'versioning': the revisiting of different fragments of literary and/or autobiographical writing, reformulating them into different, sometimes competing, versions of the self. For Gambrell this represents a way to both register the discursive constraints that inform the representation of the self at any given moment while mapping the shifting nature of the self over time. In Acker's case 'versioning' was taken to an extreme degree, reinforcing the performative and contingent nature of identity in ways that *were true* to the competing political allegiances in her work. While Acker's work borrows from the male literary avant-garde, its heady juxtaposition of high and low cultural references, forestalls any possibility of idealisation.

While Acker was ambitious for due recognition of her literary innovations, the work itself returns again and again to the impossibility of idealisation, idealism, transcendence, or salvation narratives in ways that remind us of the uncomfortable tensions in the work of feminist modernists. Her fiction borrowed from the decadent and avant-garde traditions of the picaresque novel in order to empty the *bildungsroman* of its bourgeois (gendered) claims to moral authority and insight: ‘All romanticism is stupid’ remarks one of the characters of *In Memoriam to Identity* (1998, 67), indicative of Acker’s propensity for nihilist provocations. But according to Acker, her initial forays into experimental writing were influenced by the appropriation and montage strategies of the Picture Generation artists of the 1970s, in particular Sherrie Levine’s faithful photographic reproduction of the work of male modernist photographers such as Walker Evans and Edward Weston (which like Acker’s own work was subject to formal charges of plagiarism). In this sense Acker emphasises the process of experimentation through its conceptual form rather than the end product of ‘good writing’, and writing as ‘an act of endurance’, hence her comparison of writing to bodybuilding (Vechinski, 528). But if her experiments were about pushing beyond the limits of form, they were also deeply informed by the political, intellectual, and aesthetic ethos of the various milieus or movements in which she found herself: conceptual art, feminism, punk, deconstruction. As Margaret Henderson (2017) astutely argues, ‘Just as punk music emerged as a critique of the overblown excesses of rock music ... Acker’s writing attacks the comfortable certainties of the bourgeois realist novel as a symbol of late capitalist culture’ so that her ‘feminist use of Artaud, Bataille, and Sade produces a militant and disturbing critique of gender in late capitalism, specifically the gender regime post sexual liberation’ (203). Part of the fearlessness I feel when reading Acker has a lot to do with the pulsating, disordered quality of her prose, where emotions are electrified, and nothing is sacred in terms of both style and thematic content. But above all, I admire Acker’s interrogation, if not refusal, of the crippling forms of feminised shame that produce obedience on the one hand, and wounded attachments on the other. As Emily Gould (quoted in Krauss 2018) asks,

Why do women who aren’t afraid to humiliate themselves appal us so much, and why do we rush to find superficial reasons to dismiss them (‘she’s crazy’ ‘she’s a narcissist’ ‘she’s young’ ‘she’s a famewhore’)? I think in part because they pose a threat to the social order which relies on women’s embarrassment to keep them either silent or writing in socially acceptable modes. (93)

The dismissal of Acker’s writing in the middlebrow press over the years, in spite of an avid appreciation of her work among clusters of artists, writers, and critical thinkers, all too easily slipped into a kind of disgust with feminised excess, in ways that didn’t always apply to male writers such as William Burroughs, working in a similar tradition.

But how do new generations of readers, for whom Acker’s iconoclasm might not necessarily be apparent, take to the extremities of her burlesque inversions and repetitions. In the novel, *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, Acker’s parodic representation of colonial exploitation risks a kind of complicity even as the novel contests global capitalism’s implication in colonial and neo-colonial forms of tourism and the white woman’s naïve adventure. In spite of its relatively straightforward narrative surface, *Haiti* explores, like much of Acker’s other work, the circular logic which governs the operation of power and resistance. In this sense, Acker comes close to being a true Foucauldian (at least in the Foucault inflected by Bataille’s concept of

transgression) in as much as the possibilities for resistance in Acker's fictional universe are always circumscribed by the condition of complicity in the very structures her characters are trying to escape or overthrow. In this sense her aesthetics of piracy works to find an imaginary outlaw space that eschews laws, borders, institutions all the while revealing the tenuousness, if not the outright impossibility of freedom, liberation etc. Similarly, if parody works by knowing its object well enough to reveal both a complicity of attachment and a derisive resistance to that attachment, Acker's depictions of race in *Haiti* risks precisely this compromised dynamic. But, in making us feel excruciatingly uncomfortable with Kathy's Western primitivism, Acker's parody also reminds us that all constructions of race are in a sense 'chimerical', the product of what Karen and Barbara Fields (2014) have defined as 'racecraft', the sustained illusion that race is an identity (for both racist and racial subject) rather than an identification, which perpetuates the idea of racial inequality at the expense of the conditions driving structural inequality. This is not to negate racism and its crimes, according to Karen and Barbara Fields, but to expose the monstrous fiction of race in the first instance and to track how that fiction plays out in U.S. history, from slavery and the Jim Crow era to the subprime implosion and Trump's America:

In racial disguise, inequality wears a surface camouflage that makes inequality in its most general form – the form that marks and distorts every aspect of our social and political life – hard to see, harder to discuss, and nearly impossible to tackle. (268)

Similarly, in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, colonial relations of power are figured through the unconscious naivety of the novel's protagonist, Kathy, mirroring the stealth-like manner in which global capitalism props up sexual exploitation (via pornography and romance fictions) and racial exploitation (via tourism and U.S. exceptionalism).

It is therefore fitting to end this special issue with an essay on Chris Kraus, Acker's contemporary and biographer, and a writer preoccupied with the parasitic global practices of art and culture. In her essay, 'Chris Kraus and the Limits of Global Art', Alys Moody turns to Kraus's short story 'Face' to understand how it serves as 'a kind of parable about global art' that speaks more broadly to the theme of globalisation and the legacies of modernism in Kraus's work. Framing Moody's reading is the global art thesis, disseminated by Hans Belting and others, that pinpoints the 1989 exhibition, *La Magiciens de la terre* at the Pompidou Centre 'as a bold step to leave the opposing worlds of *modern art* and *world art* behind and to arrive in a shared world of *global art*'. Moody rightly points to the elisions that inform Belting's narrow cause-and-effect version of art history, noting how it 'requires an account of modernism that is overwhelmingly Euro-American and surprisingly invested in the nation' given how this account has been pervasively challenged, more recently, Moody suggests, by global modernist studies. Although this begs the question of how 'global modernist studies' itself might be implicated in the very dynamics driving Belting's theory of global modern art? This is not to suggest that modernism wasn't global but that its (somewhat belated) institutionalisation as 'global modernist studies' is a condition of the market and of a 'risk society' in much the same way Moody perceptively tracks the rise of global art's presumed pre-eminence. Ending her essay with a close reading of Kraus's novel, *Torpor*, Moody examines how 'the structural role of anachronism in narratives of the transition from the age of modernism to the age of global art' takes an unexpected turn in Kraus's work. In 'writing after modernism, from the position of global art's abjections' Moody reveals how Kraus embraces risk as a gamble that animates the

awkwardness of the social in a world governed by inequality. In doing so, her essay skillfully illuminates the fortunes and misfortunes of 'modernist risk' for the present.

### III

At the heart of many of these essays is an acknowledgement that for women modernists and those in their wake, risk troubles the very conditions of artistic and intellectual production, a sobering corrective to high modernism's presumed (masculine) claims to originality and genius. But women modernists also had to contend with the fragile gains of early twentieth century feminism. Writing with raw conviction against the rise of fascism in *Three Guineas* (1938/2001), Virginia Woolf contemplated the threat to women's newfound political agency and social independence in the context of heightened nationalism and rising totalitarianism:

Let us never cease from thinking – what is this 'civilization' in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them? What are these professions and why should we make money out of them? Where in short is it leading us, the procession of the sons of educated men? (175)

Although Woolf's feminism was always a complicated balancing act between her political sympathies for women's rights and a concern for her literary reputation untainted by the kind of reductive logic Wittig addresses in relation to Barnes, *Three Guineas* is an angry indictment of the fear and psychic violence that connects the subordination of women within patriarchy to the subordination of the mass political subject of fascism – it is her most daring feminist work. Whilst acknowledging masculine authoritarianism as the conduit between patriarchy and fascism, the risk Woolf wages in this essay is feminist refusal: of the systems of patronage that traditionally kept women out of higher education (she declined the invitation to deliver the Clarke lectures at Cambridge in 1932) or indeed any act that leads to 'the desire to impose "our" civilisation or "our" dominion upon other people' (202).

The recent rise of totalitarianism, reactionary populism, nativism, intensified forms of racism alongside a 'free' market cannibalising almost every aspect of the public and private domains of our world, has rendered the idiom of 'risk' in these terms almost unrecognisable, and yet uncannily potent. While Woolf's politics of refusal eschews the attitude of victimhood that comes with oppression ('identity as injury'), the challenge Woolf identifies here is to seize agency without the mantle of mastery and superiority. At a time of increased pessimism about the emancipatory possibilities of art, and in an era of neoliberal individualism that encourages forms of individual 'grievance culture' (or Nietzschean 'reactive feelings') that deliberately or unwittingly occlude broad platforms for social justice, the idea of risk (in the lives and work of women modernists) must represent more than a retrospective gesture that laments an idealised heroic past. If we are to develop new political languages of responsiveness that meet the challenges of 'Neoliberalism's Frankenstein' (wounded, revengeful, and seemingly all-powerful), we may need 'experimental combinations and juxtapositions of theorists and disciplines long been held apart by vigilantly policed orthodoxies' (Brown 2018, 8). In this context what might political theorists or legal scholars learn from the ferocity of Woolf's repudiation of all forms of belligerency in *Three Guineas* or indeed what might feminist scholars discover from her palpable

discomfort and ambivalence as she struggles to articulate the meaning of anti-fascism and anti-imperialism for feminism? While our times are inexorably different although in some ways recognisably similar, the work of women modernists do not represent what Hemmings has identified as a 'lost feminism' but rather part of the contested and uneven narrative of feminist history that compels us to think about what is at stake for feminism in the present (2011). This collection of essays prompts us to imagine what might it mean in the twenty-first century to 'risk anything'?

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Natalya Lusty** is Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Melbourne and an ARC Future Fellow (2018–2022). Her publications include *Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Ashgate 2007; Routledge, 2017), *Dreams and Modernity: A Cultural History* (Routledge, 2013) with Helen Groth, and the co-edited collections, *Modernism and Masculinity* (CUP, 2014) and *Photography and Ontology: Unsettling Images* (Routledge, 2019) with Donna West Brett, and the forthcoming *Cambridge Critical Concepts* volume, *Surrealism* (2020). She has been awarded a Princeton University Humanities Council Fellowship for 2020.

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