

Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism

Lauren Fournier

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In *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism*, Lauren Fournier embarks on an interdisciplinary study of what is often referred to as the “autotheoretical turn” in culture, focusing on “autotheory” as both textual form and artistic practice, although she is decisively more interested in its politicized, queer, and feminist transmedial manifestations than in delimiting its qualities as a textual genre. While she provides a definition grounded on the integration of a self-narrative with philosophy or theory in ways that are self-reflexive and performative, she also frames the concept as an “impulse” that bridges different disciplines and mediums, with direct roots in feminist practices. As a result, the author introduces a diverse body of work by feminist, LGBTIQ+ and BIPOC artists and writers to understand how this autotheoretical impulse helps them to affirm their right to exist and produce in fields where they had been historically marginalized.

The monograph is structured in five chapters, each exploring different manifestations of autotheory through the works of scholars, writers and artists, showcasing the flexibility of the term and its possibilities. The introduction (1-69) traces the origins of the concept to a series of feminist works and practices from the 1960s, proving that feminist writing has always been tied to autotheoretical impulses and performing an open-ended but comprehensive genealogy of autotheory and its antecedents, until finally situating its widespread use in the mid 2010s thanks to the works of Maggie Nelson and Paul B. Preciado. Fournier’s focus on autotheoretical impulses across different mediums and genres, from affect theory and literary studies to conceptual and visual art, allows her to go through a very diverse body of work while acknowledging the marginal place that autotheoretical practice still occupies in the often gendered and euro-centric academic, artistic and literary scenes.

The first chapter (71-97) focuses on the work by conceptual artist Adrian Piper and specifically on her performance *Food for the Spirit* (1971), which Fournier reads as autotheoretical. The author is interested in Piper’s self-portraiture and the intersection of this grounded act of self-affirmation with the rigorous study of Kant, which she interprets as a gesture that bridges Kantian philosophy and its often-perceived disregard for the body with the artist’s own corporality, challenging long-standing views that serious philosophical thought is incompatible with personal experience and allowing Piper to inscribe herself in the two systems, philosophy and conceptual art, that had historically excluded racialized women like her. This tension and the role of theory and its complicated relationship with cultural capital and commodification are at the center of the second chapter (99-132), where Fournier studies how artists and writers engage with theory

through autotheoretical impulses that reconcile it with more activist, community-based practices and languages.

The next two chapters (133-220) study the complex articulations of citational practices in autotheoretical works; one interested in the performative inclusion of scholarly modes of citation into artistic practice and the other in citation as a feminist, autotheoretical strategy that is employed as a gesture of activist identification with the work of others and not as a way of legitimizing the validity of the work itself. While Fournier largely focuses on *The Argonauts*, one of the most established (and arguably studied) autotheoretical works in the present, she introduces new ideas by framing her analysis through what she calls “intertextual identification”, the driving force behind citational practices in autotheoretical works that points to the process by which artists or writers identify with a particular work of theory and establish an “intertextual intimacy” with the texts they connect with, resulting in different citational practices that acknowledge the impact of others in ways that differ from conventional scholarly modes of citation.

The final chapter (221-60) offers a close-reading of the politics of disclosure present in *I Love Dick* (1997), another well-studied text within literary and gender studies, that nonetheless introduces the reader to a timely analysis of the ways in which it foreshadowed contemporary articulations of public disclosure in internet culture as seen in movements like #MeToo and what is often referred to as “cancel culture”. In true autotheoretical fashion, the author enacts a self-exercise of disclosure by naming contemporary academics that had sexual misconduct accusations and how they impacted her as an artist and academic, inscribing her own work with the ones she studies throughout the monograph.

These moments of incursion by Fournier into the autotheoretical not just through content but also form, as well as her conceptualization of autotheory as an impulse that can be identified across different cultural manifestations to different effects, are one of the book’s greatest strengths. *Autotheory as Feminist Practice* provides the reader with a rich argument that, instead of reducing autotheory to its literary and academic expressions, ties it to the wider autotheoretical turn in culture, through a timely analysis on what it means to ground theory on the self in the context of identity politics and feminist and queer activism. With its comprehensive archive of artistic and literary works that explore autotheoretical ways of engaging with the world and diverse ways of inhabiting it, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice* is a rich addition to the emerging scholarship on autotheory and will be especially valuable for those interested in the ethical possibilities the concept offers when willing to occupy the liminal space between the very arbitrary separations that autotheory challenges, such as a life and art and theory and practice.

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