

AUTO THEORY AS FEMINIST PRACTICE IN ART, WRITING, AND CRITICISM

LAUREN FOURNIER

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“THEORY” (WITH A CAPITAL “T”)

Diagnosis: colonialism.

—Lindsay Nixon (@notvanishing)

What does the invocation of “theory” do in contrast to the more militant “manifesto,” or the more feminized “memoir”? One answer might be the naming and claiming of intellectual credibility, which is part of the turn toward autotheory today. There is a historical tie between the intellectual authority of “theory” and the devaluing of those who are other than the intellectual standard of that time. Part of the politics of this autotheoretical turn in culture may well be that BIPOC, women, femme, trans, and gender-nonconforming folks align their work with theory to underline its critical potency and import. To consider the drive behind artists and writers choosing to frame their personal-critical work as theory, one must consider the history of this word “*theory*,” the politics of the term, and who has had access to the title of “theorist.”

Today, many artists maintain adjacent professional practices as scholars and educators, curators, writers and critics, editors, directors, and community organizers, and the question of the role philosophy and theory play in the production and reception of their work is one they must consider at some point. Theory’s place in academia and the art world continues to be contended, and the politics of theory becomes particularly charged in relation to intersectional and decolonial feminisms—which might question the politics of legibility and intelligibility in “theory” as a historically Eurocentric, American-centric, masculinist, and colonial discourse. While some contemporary artists and feminists approach theory with wariness and caution, others readily invoke it to describe their way of working. The rising trend for artists and writers to align their politicized and personal work as *theory* is worthy of consideration in light of the larger autotheoretical turn.

Historically, for one’s work to be considered intellectual and critical, as a philosopher, historian, critic, or professor, one had to have an air of objective authority. Men who are Euro-American, upper class, not racialized, and at least heterosexual-passing tended to be granted the kinds of “objective” authority required for their work to be considered critical and intellectual, while women, people of color, Indigenous people, poor and working-class people, non-university- or college-educated people, and

others were historically abjected from that realm because of their assumedly uncritical hypersubjectivity and embodiment—a problem that continues through to the present day in mobilizations of the notion of identity politics. The very notion of theoretical abstraction, or a vacuumed *rigor* that exists for its own ends and apart from any particular body, is a masculine—even macho—and white, colonialist ideal.

Sometimes autotheoretical work is heavily citational of more canonically philosophical and academic materials, with the artist drawing attention to those references by rendering them visual and material, sculptural and poetic, in otherwise self-reflective work. At other times, as is often in the case for those artists and writers who find the given philosophical systems violent or exclusionary, the work eschews such explicit referencing of canonically philosophical or theoretical work. Instead it focuses primarily on engendering theory from the artists' and writers' lived, experiential perspective as people integrated into a particular community or ancestral context, or referencing those forms of knowledge that are passed on by means other than peer-reviewed publications or white-cube gallery shows—including long-existing Indigenous knowledge systems grounded in specific land and cosmological contexts that are cognizant and attuned as such, with place-based knowledge shared orally in relationship with an elder, for example.

What are the criteria when it comes to understanding work *as* “theory” and “philosophy”? Who gets to define what constitutes theory, who constitutes a theorist? Whose theories are valuable or valued in a given institution or discursive space? What modes of making work are understood as legitimately critical or sufficiently rigorous for academia and the contemporary art world? Who can write or make work in ways that are understood *as* theory? The autotheoretical impulse, tied up as it is with intersectional feminist histories of bridging theory and practice, art and life, is entwined in these questions. To respond to these questions, I consider autotheory as practiced by a range of working artists looking to contested meanings of theory across contexts. I draw from long-standing feminist and BIPOC traditions of critiquing the politics of these often Euro-American-centric discourses called “theory” and “philosophy,” from Irigaray’s critiques of the gendered blind spots of theory, to hooks’s critiques of the

hegemonies within feminist theory itself, to Zoe Todd's Métis feminist critique of ontology as fundamentally colonialist.⁸⁶

In "An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word for Colonialism," Métis scholar Zoe Todd presents a convincing argument—which went viral online—that the so-called "ontological turn" in contemporary theory is simply appropriating and reiterating Indigenous ways of knowledge. "Personal paradigm shifts have a way of sneaking up on you," Todd writes in the opening line of her essay, going on to describe her moment of revelation in 2013 that came when hearing Bruno Latour, one of her theory "heroes," speak on climate, and perceiving his view as an iteration, in slightly different terms, of the long-existing Inuit cosmopolitical thought that had been passed on to Todd from her Inuit friends—but without a recognition of that source.⁸⁷ Writing from the disciplinary context of anthropology, Todd confronts the "epistemic violence" toward, and erasures of, Indigenous knowledges in larger conversations around ontology; she does so by writing autotheoretical vignettes that move between anecdotal reflections and citations of those Indigenous thinkers who are "discussing the same topics" that theorists are but in ways that might not be clearly apparent *as* theoretical based on the colonialist biases that writers in the West are entrenched in.

The question of who has access to theoretical discourse, as well as who has access to the "I"—an "I" that can speak with agency and be heard—is central in Hiba Ali's *Postcolonial Language*.⁸⁸ Using performance for the camera and the form of the performance lecture, or what Ali refers to more specifically here as the "thesis performance" (made, as it was, in the context of her MFA program), Ali embodies ideas from postmodern feminist theory and so-called postcolonial theory, including Judith Butler's work on the politics of whose lives are *livable* and whose lives are mourned.⁸⁹ Ali translates this theory into practice through the deliberate, repetitive act of naming in lengthy parts of the video, mourning those who might have gone unmourned in the context of American drone warfare in the Middle East. Through the media of video art and performance with other POC collaborators, she processes postcolonial theory and language through her experience as an Arab woman living in North America in the twenty-first century.

“Do ‘I’ have the right to enunciate this term? Do ‘I’ have the privilege, prestige, political authority or affiliation?” are questions that Ali and the other performers return to over the course of the work. Ali’s statement that “the experience of the immigrant is deemed as either too personal or too political” strikes a nerve, functioning as a commentary on the limitations of feminism historically and perhaps naïve assumptions of the inclusivity of feminist mantras, like “the personal is political,” that developed during the 1960s second wave of feminism. She posits the racialized immigrant as that who exceeds the limits of such feminist discourse—that who is abjected from understandings of the personal-as-political.

Decolonizing theory is an imperative tied to larger movements, some of them here on the colonized lands of North America/Turtle Island, to decolonize academic and art world institutions. Part of the move toward decolonizing theory is the turn toward restoring and bringing back to life forms of knowledge and language that colonial forces have attempted to extinguish. The artist Joi T. Arcand works with Plains Cree syllabics to create site-responsive works of art that draw attention to the politics of intelligibility and communication on the colonized lands known as Canada, where the colonizer’s languages, English and French, exerted themselves with a certain force. Indigenous autotheoretical practices present ripe possibilities for both resisting and subverting colonialist ideologies—including the neocolonial moves of superficial indigenization—and serving as self-determining sites of cultural, epistemological, and linguistic resurgence. Indigenous and Black artists and writers work autotheoretically as a means of questioning the parameters of “the theoretical”—or what constitutes theory: rigor, but by what standard?—in light of pressing questions around subjectivity, colonialism, structural racism, and who is precluded access to self-determination, collective mobilization, agency, and autonomy in spaces of art and culture, and in universities and colleges.

The move toward decolonizing theory, and engendering theory from embodied experience, is coming into clear view across a range of Indigenous and Métis feminist, queer, and two-spirit artists’ practices, with notable examples including Thirza Cuthand’s performances for video, Lindsay Nixon’s book *nîtisânak*,⁹⁰ and David Garneau’s series of symbolic, trenchant still-life paintings on Indigenous and Métis research methodologies and intertextualities—which shirk settler-colonial influences such as Catholicism

and recenter kinship systems and land-based modes of thought. In Cuthand's *Working Baby Dyke Theory: The Diasporic Impact of Cross-Generational Barriers*, one of Cuthand's earliest works of video art, the artist makes theory from their lived experience as a queer, Indigenous artist growing up on Treaty 6 lands, Saskatchewan, in the 1990s. Cuthand continues their long and rich practice of performance for the camera, as they find it an efficacious way to foreground their particular body and the ways in which it is "marked" both in the world and in the work. During a studio visit with Cuthand, I listened to the artist describe being drawn to video art as a medium because it allowed them to accessibly represent their own body—the site of various forms of violence and oppression in the context of colonialist Canada, but also the site of pleasure and agency and joyful and mad subjectivity, and of aspects that exceed the thinking of colonial history. Through video art, they can subvert discourses and systems *through* the specificities of their performing, speaking, joking body-self, sometimes performing alone and other times alongside Indigenous, two-spirit, and queer settler friends. The immediacy of their body and personality, expressed on-screen, is transformative for the ideas and discourses at play in the work.

In *Working Baby Dyke Theory*, the artist wrestles with questions related to identity and community, diaristically using performance for the camera to voice their desires for love and belonging as a young, Indigenous queer person. Coming out as a lesbian on the Saskatchewan prairies, in a city with little queer visibility, Thirza found themselves turning to books as a source of understanding. But books could only go so far: Thirza narrates, in a voice-over accompanying a visual shot of a pile of scattered books on their floor, "I'd gotten tired of just reading about lesbians, so I thought maybe I should go out to meet other ones." Thirza confesses their experiences, as they hungrily sought out community, of being tokenized and mistreated in a small lesbian scene that, in their view, was centered on an older queer community and its needs. With the teenage artist self-positioned as a "Baby Dyke," an identification that comes perhaps as much from their context as from their desire, this video work becomes a "Working Baby Dyke Theory" that represents Cuthand's desires and frustrations living as queer and Indigenous in a particular time and place in Canada's history. This is a philosophical approach to queer living and self-determination in which the artist critiques aspects of the community as it currently exists while affirming the possibility

of another way of being in relation *as* Indigenous and queer. Echoing the fluidity of other feminists who have worked autotheoretically, and like Sedgwick, Cuthand has moved in and out of different gender identifications and orientations, shifting language from “lesbian” to “boi” to “2 Spirit” and back again.

To understand contemporary artists’ recent engagement with theory through autotheoretical practices, the history of this thing called “theory” must be considered at least briefly. Theory is associated with the tripartite lineages of “Marxism, psychoanalysis, and structuralism,” as well as with the poststructuralist work of Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Althusser, Baudrillard, and others.⁹¹ Fredric Jameson locates the discursive shift from “philosophy” to “theory” in the 1960s, when postmodernism wrought its many ontological and epistemological changes. Historicizing the waning of philosophy and the waxing of theory over the course of the twentieth century, Jameson moves from Sartrean existentialism as the peak of high modernism and the last notable example of “philosophy” to structuralism and poststructuralism as the beginning of theory; he highlights the influence of such factors as the linguistic turn, Barthes’s “The Death of the Author,” and the emergent, small “*p*” politics of the personal in this evolution.⁹² That existential phenomenology, embodied in Sartre, as well as in de Beauvoir, Husserl, Kierkegaard, is a precursor to autotheory—by way of writing philosophy through an attention to embodied experience as such—bears mention.

As the authority of philosophy wanes, theory emerges as a form of “metaphilosophy,” or what Jameson describes as “the transformation of philosophy into a material practice.” He defines theory as a fundamentally postmodern form that is intertextual, citational, and appropriative in its references and materials. In contrast, philosophy generates its own monolithic and authoritative “truths” that are not dependent on referencing other texts.⁹³ For Jameson, the crisis of philosophy was spurred by the so-called “death of the subject,” a death of not only “the individual ego or personality, but also the supreme philosophical subject, the cogito but also the *auteur* of the great philosophical *system*.” The philosophizing subject is displaced by ideology, and the discipline of philosophy is displaced by “praxis and terror.”⁹⁴ It is a bleak representation of critical life after

philosophy—and characterizes Jameson’s cynicism toward postmodern cultural production.

In this Jamesonian view of history, Sartrean existentialism in the 1940s and 1950s marks the climax of philosophy before the dawn of theory; others, such as Arkady Plotnitsky, point to earlier shifts, such as that prompted by Nietzsche, as having led to “the death of philosophy, at least as hitherto understood.” Curiously, while Jameson posits Sartrean existentialism as the end of philosophy, Plotnitsky credits de Beauvoir’s feminist existentialism in *The Second Sex* as “the first sign of the second death of philosophy,” after Nietzsche.⁹⁵ If Jameson is skeptical about the value of post-1950s intellectual shifts, he still posits the 1960s as “a moment of a universal liberation, a global unbinding of energies” that had consequential effects on the ontology and practice of theory and art.⁹⁶ This globalized “unbinding of energies” politically and socially could also be felt across the fields of literature and academia. Autobiography and life-writing, for example, did not emerge as an area of serious academic study until the 1960s.⁹⁷

In “Deleuze in the Age of Posttheory,” the literary scholar Jeffrey R. Di Leo describes “the alleged ‘posttheoretical turn’” in academia, where “theory” means French poststructuralist theory that is, presumably, written by men (or that does not position itself as explicitly feminist), whereas “cultural studies” is something else entirely. Di Leo describes the shift in the 1980s as a time when “theory came to encompass a widening of perspectives”: as such, the so-called “low theory” of feminisms, postcolonial theory, and so on, began to supplant so-called “high theory.” Looking to the 1990s, Di Leo writes that “the *high* theory of the ’70s which was coming to acquire a timeless, ahistorical, permanence in the ’80s through its codification in *method* was giving way to the *low theory* of cultural studies which re-emphasized the contingent, local, historical, and contextual character of all cultural artifacts. ... By the ’90s, cultural studies had broadened to include postcolonial, queer, and media studies, while theory was showing only the faintest signs of development.” In this view, critical race, feminist, and queer theory are something ontologically different from “theory” properly understood: they are posited as a form of “cultural studies” that, at best, is a kind of “low theory.”⁹⁸ Di Leo’s emphasis on the place of “the contingent, local” in rendering so-called low theory *low* is significant when one considers the development of autotheory as a feminist mode. Such an

oppositional understanding of “cultural studies” and “high theory” sets the stage for a better understanding of the intersectional feminist politics of theory that autotheoretical practices set in motion.

The misguided division between identity politics and “theory” is a thinly veiled racist and sexist configuration of what kinds of knowledge are critically upheld. As David Chariandy puts it, “Theory, real theory, will appear to be white,” and the more opaque it is, the better: “like being an asshole.”⁹⁹ Even today, scholars seem to know well the white- and male-dominated nature of “true” or “real” theory and philosophy—at least as it is historically canonized. I have heard from women and gender-nonconforming scholars that, when they presented their work at philosophy conferences, they were the only women or non-men there, and when they went to women’s studies and gender studies conferences, what they were doing was no longer considered “philosophy” but something else (as if working from a discipline like gender studies precluded one from ascending to the supposedly more intellectually pure realm of philosophy). Autotheory reanimates “subject-centered inquiry”¹⁰⁰ in a way that rigorously engages the “master discourse(s)” of theory. If theory via Kant, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, 1970s poststructuralism, and Di Leo’s “high theory” (which ostensibly disclaims subjectivity and contingency for something universal) is at odds with an intersectional feminist politics of subjectivity and locatedness, then autotheory provides contemporary artists and writers with a way to work through this difference, process these tensions, and generate different ways of thinking about, and being with, theory. Feminist autotheory positions subject-centered work *as* theory using a range of tactics and strategies.

In a contemporary climate in which terms like “posttheory,” “antitheory,” and “the death of theory” circulate, I consider how autotheory offers up different ways of approaching the work of theorizing, and the relationship between the rise of autotheory, the institutional encouragement of integrating theory and practice, and recent discourses of us being in a “posttheory” time. Indeed, like BIPOC feminist critiques of the so-called “death of the avant-garde” in the 1960s—at the very time when more kinds of people were able to access avant-garde spaces and ways of working (or be recognized as such)—the claim that we are now “post theory,” or living in the wake of theory’s proverbial “death,” needs to be considered in relation to the rapid rise of autotheory and the feminist, antiracist, and anticolonial or decolonial politics therein.