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## CITATION AS RELATION

Intertextual Intimacies and Identifications

Reading allowed me to inhabit my life more completely.  
—Genevieve Hudson, *A Little in Love with Everyone*

Not everything inside of you is yours.  
—Anne Boyer, keynote address at *AUTO-* (2019)

### POSTMEMOIR, MARGINALIA, AND THE MISE-EN-PAGE

“Everyone, it seems, has a memoir to write,” critic Jessica Weisberg observes in the *New Yorker*, and “one wonders if there are any readers left or if they’re all too busy blogging.” Her May 2012 article, “Can Self-Exposure Be Private?,” was prepared in response to Canadian American artist Moyra Davey’s *Les Goddesses* (2011), a film featured in the 2012 Whitney Biennial. Weisberg focuses on Davey’s alternating between references to philosophy and literature and the poetic representations of herself and her life in the space of her Manhattan apartment: “It always comes back to her.” In one of the most memorable scenes from *Les Goddesses*, Moyra takes a book off her bookshelf and, cracking open a window of her apartment, leans over the edge to blow dust off the book’s spine. Weisberg points out Davey’s noncontemporary yet “remarkably current” references to the history of philosophy, constituted in a form that falls “somewhere between a critical study and a personal essay.”<sup>1</sup> While not offering a term to describe this

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Moyra Davey, *Les Goddesses*, 2011,  
film (still). Courtesy of the artist.

reflective and readerly way that Davey works, writing books and making films, Weisberg seems to be dancing around using the term “autotheory.”

As autotheory takes shape in different ways across different media and practices, including the essayistic films of artists like Davey, one of its most obvious manifestations in the contemporary is the visible integration of references to theory and philosophy in the context of a written autobiography or memoir. Here, conventionally “academic” practices such as footnoting and margin-marking are incorporated into works that, on first glance, might seem to ally with genres of autobiography and memoir. What prompts artists and writers to make these references visible as a key part of their production, working with citations as artist’s material? How are readers and audiences to understand the often performative integration of such scholarly modes in creative work? And what is to be made of the emergent form of the postmemoir—which seems to be growing at a similar pace as the larger autotheoretical turn—wherein memoiristic practice and criticism or other critical practice are brought together as part of a single, often generically nebulous, text?

Questions of citation are the focus of this chapter and the next. I consider citation—the referencing of other people and texts as sources of influence and information—as a mode of intertextual intimacy and identification. With that in mind, I reflect on the possibilities and problematics of citation as a practice of community formation and communion in feminist contexts. In this chapter I focus mainly on literary works, with Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015) as my main case study, while in the following chapter I turn to the visual arts.<sup>2</sup> But there is much crossover in both cases; as I’ve emphasized, the autotheoretical impulse manifests most clearly in those expanded contemporary practices where the arts, literature, and criticism meet. I open with a reading of *The Argonauts*, among the earliest texts to be described as autotheory in contemporary literary circles, along with Roland Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s affect theory. In doing so, I introduce a queer literary history of performative citation practices, revealing the ways that citation in these autotheoretical works brings together different modes of critical practice to commingle and transform. This establishes a context for reading the performative, even theatrical, use of citation in postmemoir and autobiography as a strategy in feminist and queer work. I ground my reading

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Moyra Davey, *Les Goddesses*, 2011, film  
(still). Courtesy of the artist.

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of *The Argonauts* in notions of citation, broadly understood, to consider questions related to reading and textual pleasure from an intersectional feminist perspective.

I consider the use of citation in *The Argonauts* in relation to significant precursors, such as Gloria E. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) and Nicole Brossard's *fiction théorique* in books such *Picture Theory* (1982), whose writers engage citation as part of a larger critical, autobiographically driven, and collectively motivated (for the "collective" of lesbian Mestiza/Chicana/Chicanx communities and lesbian Francophone/Québécois communities, in these respective examples) project of theorization and articulation.<sup>3</sup> Contextualizing Nelson's formal innovation in relation to Barthes, I also look to succeeding iterations of this mode, as found in such works as Joanna Walsh's *Break.up* (2018), to consider the future of these ways of citing theory in the margins.<sup>4</sup> This leads to a reflection on the possibility (or impossibility) of queer feminist communities in *theory*, and what a reference to theory actuates when incorporated into an otherwise personal or memoiristic work. Nelson's incorporation of her lover and life partner, the American transgender visual artist Harry Dodge, into the citational structure of her text provides an opportunity to reflect on intersubjectivity, authorship, and the ethical relationships between the writing "self" and an "other."

#### MARGINAL CONCERNS: MARKING THE MARGINS, QUEERLY

Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* is a work of autotheory that brings feminism into conversation with queer theory, generating a text that is responsive to philosophical and theoretical questions relating to queerness and normativity, relationships and family structures, feminism and motherhood, and the philosophical and material capacities of language. Like other works of autotheory, *The Argonauts* exceeds given categories of genre and form. As someone whose work has largely shaped the trend called "autotheory" in literary circles, it is no coincidence that Nelson writes adeptly across genres: she has worked as a poet, essayist, biographer, novelist, art critic, and art historian, and much of her work reveals alliances between poetry and visual art. Nelson was previously the chair of creative writing

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at the studio-based CalArts, and recently moved to USC as a professor of English; she is part of a growing trend for the autotheoretically oriented to thrive in both art and literary worlds, a trend also exemplified by Claudia Rankine, Chris Kraus, Hilton Als, and Jennifer Doyle.

The practice of marking up the margins of a book while reading often shows a deeper level of engagement with a text, as we saw in chapter 1 with Piper's markings on her copy of *Critique of Pure Reason*, the spine of the book' broken and the pages splayed open for ease of use. The marked-up-margins show an artist's or writer's physical engagement with the book: maybe there's a passage that rings particularly significant to ideas they are working through, so they draw an arrow next to it, or they add a note. Adding marginalia becomes a means for writers to elaborate their responses to reading or a way to identify notable passages they'd like to return to in the future.

Autotheory has an interesting relationship with margins, and writers and artists who work autotheoretically often extend the conceit of writing, annotating, and scribbling in the margins in conceptual ways. We see this reproduced in published literary work, for instance in the *mise-en-page* of *The Argonauts*, where Nelson places the name of the theorist, writer, or artist cited in the margin of the page directly beside where she quotes or summarizes their ideas. While a formally innovative practice, this beside-the-text and in-the-margins use of citation is not Nelson's invention: she is, in fact, reiterating the form that Barthes innovated in his *A Lover's Discourse*.

In his book, Barthes places the surnames of different philosophers—from Goethe, Nietzsche, and Sartre to the Flemish mystic Ruysbroeck and the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott—in the margins of a loosely autobiographical book that is constituted as different “fragments” or poetic vignettes of lovers interpellated by the discourse of love. Nelson uses this structure as a container of sorts, within which she seeks to unpack and understand experiences as a queer-identified woman interpellated by discourses of love in her relationship with Harry Dodge. Nelson shares Barthes's desire to philosophize questions related to language and love, and she extends the critical-personal curiosities that drive Barthes's text to questions of particular relevance to her life, from whether a cisgender woman can be queerly pregnant to what queer family-making and feminist stepparenting might look like today.

At first glance, *The Argonauts* comes across as a memoir populated by references in the margins of the page to named philosophers, theorists, and writers, from Luce Irigaray and Ralph Waldo Emerson to Paul B. Preciado and Anne Carson. Nelson contextualizes the autobiographical narrative of her relationship with Dodge within an intertextual terrain of citations sourced from literature, theory, philosophy, and art. The choice of citations comes out of Nelson’s practice of theorizing her lived material through these different referential texts and, in doing so, reveals the personal to be theoretical—and also ethical, aesthetic, and political. By placing names in the margins, Nelson draws attention to the citations as one reads: in English, and in Euro-American publications generally, one reads from left to right, top to bottom, and so the eye is drawn to the citation in the margin as part of the experience of reading. This is in contrast to endnotes and even footnotes, which a reader may choose whether or not to read—something that only the most attentive and studious readers might do.<sup>5</sup>

In *Break.up* (2018), British novelist Joanna Walsh sets single-sentence quotations in the margins, citing author and text, as might be found in an epigraph, physically beside the anchoring narrative of the narrator’s (ostensibly Walsh’s) transnational travels following a break-up. So many words become integrated into the margins that the quotations push into the body of the text, changing the shape of the text on the mise-en-page to become almost serpentine. This intervenes in the reader’s experience of reading Walsh’s “personal” narrative—a postmemoir memoir of sorts that follows the protagonist’s experience traveling and writing emails in the wake of a terminated romantic affair. In many ways, Walsh’s *Break.up* brings full circle the ouroboric orientations of autotheory—reflexive and reflective, citing others as part of an autotheoretical community. It is probably no coincidence that most of the writers she cites are themselves ones who have worked autotheoretically, from Barthes to Kraus.

To be sure, the theme of writing-in-the-margins even crops up on an intranarrative, thematic level in Kraus’s *I Love Dick*, when Kraus playfully collides the conceit of female-coded practices of diary writing with German high theory in her metafictional references to the character Chris Kraus writing marginalia. Describing Chris Kraus’s process, Kraus explains:

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She read Harlequin Romances, wrote her diary and scribbled margin notes about her love for Dick in Sylvère's treasured copy of Heidegger's *La question de la technique*. The book was evidence of the intellectual roots of German fascism. She called it *La technique de Dick*.<sup>6</sup>

For the metacharacter “Chris Kraus,” marking the margins as a reader becomes the female character’s way of instantiating a critical-creative intervention into a male-authored text and finding voice as a writer through doing so. In contrast to overwriting or disregarding a text, the woman’s act of marking in the margins becomes a way of writing with it and beside it, possibly subverting it along the way. While Kraus incorporates her dense array of references into the body of the text—leaving the margins of the page “clear,” as it were—there is a nod to the importance of marginalia in an attentive and rigorous reading practice. The physical act of scribbling in the margins comes to stand for the simultaneity of rigor and embodiment.

#### AUTO THEORY AS A LOVER’S DISCOURSE

As revealed in both the margins and the body of the page, Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* is a meeting space for different lineages and practices of what has come to be called “queer theory”—lineages that Nelson positions beside her own decidedly queer life. The first is represented by Barthes, a gay male French theorist who serves as a hinge between structuralist semiotics and poststructuralism and whose queerness, while significant to his role in contemporary theory, remains latent in his texts. The second, interrelated lineage comes from Sedgwick, a queer feminist affect theorist who identifies as a fat woman and a gay man.<sup>7</sup> Nelson performatively weaves these lineages together within the traditions of the New York School poets and Wittgensteinian language games to write a work of autotheory, using citations to build a feminist canon that spans the literary and the philosophical.

By bringing these lineages together and processing them through the context of her life, Nelson opens up space for larger theoretical transformations in queer theory. She revisits Barthes and Sedgwick through the perspective of her autobiographical experiences and theoretical investigations as a writer, lover, and scholar, approaching their works as an



intertextual ally. One of the questions she is most consumed by in the book is the status of the normative/transgressive binary in queer theory and queer life, and she comes to form related questions, such as what a maternal erotics that evades Freud might mean. Barthes's and Sedgwick's frameworks serve as textual conditions of possibility and as catalysts for Nelson's inquiry into these questions, with Nelson's life experience factoring in as anecdotal evidence.

*The Argonauts* opens with an intimate scene of sharing theory: Nelson and Dodge debate Wittgenstein's idea that language can contain the inexpressible. While Nelson the writer begins by seeing language as sufficient, Dodge the visual artist believes "that words are *not* good enough," and with this a conflict is established that will continue to the end of the text.<sup>8</sup> Through intimate contact, Nelson's theoretical stance shifts, and *The Argonauts* becomes a site for her to work through her now troubled understanding of language and the inexpressible. On the most obvious level, language is limited in its use of gender pronouns: "Dodge is neither male nor female,"<sup>9</sup> and is therefore always already limited in/by language. Embodying the practice of autotheory, fragments or pieces of text become the means by which Nelson expresses (and, by the logic of performativity, constitutes) her love for Dodge, as well as the means by which she generates new theory in her work.

The second passage that Nelson shares with Dodge is from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Barthes's oeuvre is a key point of reference for Nelson. The book's title draws from his story of the mythical vessel *The Argo*, a "fabled craft whose repeated rebuildings result in a ship that shares no scrap of timber with its prior iteration, yet somehow remains itself,"<sup>10</sup> framing Nelson's text in relation to themes of transformation and becoming. The book's opening pages connect the symbol of the *Argo* to motifs of love, repetition, language, and time: "The subject who utters the phrase 'I love you' is like 'the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name.'"<sup>11</sup> In this same mode, Nelson appropriates the structure and form of Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*, iterating it to queer feminist effect. By placing text in the margins of the page, she experiments with the limits of the *mise-en-page* in what might seem, at first, to be a more conventional memoir or life-writing text. Through her own autobiographical discourse and choice of citations, she enacts a Barthesian "rebuilding."

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In the opening to *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes includes a section titled "How This Book Is Constructed"<sup>12</sup>; in this way, it resembles a work of conceptual art, which is often presented with an artist's statement to provide the reader or viewer with a point of entry. *A Lover's Discourse* is structured as a series of what Barthes calls "Figures"—"fragments of discourse," anecdotes from the lover's life framed within small provocations, with the title at the top of the page serving as the "argument" and a dictionary definition of a word (most often a verb, but sometimes a noun) serving as a kind of epigraph. Barthes includes his "References"—names, titles, and initials—in the margins of the page, a practice Nelson repeats in *The Argonauts*. Part of the legacy of poststructuralism, to which Barthes's writings were formative, is the understanding of any literary or cultural text as a "tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture."<sup>13</sup> Barthes's argument in "The Death of the Author" challenges the long-held view that the literary text originates with the author alone as the singular source of its meaning—a holdover from the Romantic era, with its view of authorial genius and genesis in the (most often male) scribe. As a text, *The Argonauts* is reflexive about its constitution as a "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash,"<sup>14</sup> and in this way extends the poststructuralist play Barthes described as characterizing literature of the future.

Barthes explains that *A Lover's Discourse* is a "simulation" of a lover's discourse rather than something recorded from life, positioning his practice as a movement away from the psychoanalytic and toward the performative by using theoretical and performance metaphors, and approaching the fragments of discourse as akin to physical, embodied "figures." "The word," Barthes writes, "is to be understood, not in its rhetorical sense, but rather in its gymnastic or choreographic acceptance."<sup>15</sup> Barthes frames the work as performative, making clear how he "stage[s] an utterance, not an analysis," and composes a "structural" portrait rather than a psychological one through the text. As a "simulation" of discourse written by the theorist who proclaimed that "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation,"<sup>16</sup> *A Lover's Discourse* puts Barthes's theory into practice, bringing together a range of voices and texts to create a paradoxically monologic "dialogue" on the language of love—its discursive structures, its strange logic.

With the form and structure of *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes demonstrates a palpable move toward the autotheoretical. He brings together the names and titles of different authors and texts—many of them philosophical and theoretical—with interlocutors from his own life to reflect on philosophical and discursive questions relating to the nature of romantic love; he refers to the different reading practices that give rise to these different types of citations as “ordinary reading ... insistent reading ... occasional reading ... conversations with friends.”<sup>17</sup> This concern with reading practices (and the different discursive and epistemological modes they engender) is shared by both Sedgwick and Nelson.

Even as he seeks to shift the emphasis away from the author as the single origin of a text's meaning and toward the reader as the new “destination” for a multiplicity of meanings,<sup>18</sup> Barthes remains the one who assembles the different texts and, like a documentarian, retains a large amount of control in constructing the narrative (open-ended as it may be) that the reader encounters. Though he places the words “put together” in quotes that rhetorically mimic air quotes, Barthes nevertheless does put together different references next to his own words and reflections, drawing from diverse literary and theoretical sources in a classically postmodern way. Instead of two lovers speaking to or with each other, in Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* one man “speak[s] within himself, amorously, confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak.”<sup>19</sup> The “other” here is objectified (“the loved object”) and silent (“does not speak”), while the lover-speaker—a vaguely autobiographical Barthes—speaks “within himself” about the passion and pains of being in love, based on his own experience of that physiological and affective state. The speaker positions himself as a madman for love: by including fragments such as “I am crazy,” the conceit of the speaker as a split self “speaking within himself” is at home with contemporaneous French theoretical writings of the 1970s, including Deleuze and Guattari's work on the “schizoid,” and other experimental approaches to poststructuralism and schizophrenia (many of them published in translation for an English-speaking American readership in *Semiotext(e)*'s “Schizo/Culture”).

One of Barthes's aims in writing *A Lover's Discourse* was to elevate the discourse of lovers—an everyday discourse, as well as a private one—to the realm of critical theory. At the time of his writing, this discourse was,

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he wrote, “completely forsaken by the surrounding language: ignored, disparaged, or derided by them, severed not only from authority but also from the mechanisms of authority (sciences, techniques, arts).”<sup>20</sup> Barthes brings together the “low” of lovers’ speech with the “high” of philosophy. Composing the text with a view to a mass public, he hoped these “figures”—anecdote-like fragments of phenomenological states of being in love—would be recognizable to readers from their own lives; he emphasized that the work’s success would lie in this kind of reception: “A figure is established if at least someone can say: ‘That’s so true! I recognize that scene of language.’”<sup>21</sup> The meanings of this cross-genre work are grounded in lived experience—both from the perspective of the author and from that of the reader. Of course, the “author” here is at once Barthes and the writers whose words make up the “tissue of citations” he points to in the margins. Furthermore, the reader, according to Barthes’s logic, is also part author in being a coproducer of the text’s meaning, recognizing himself in the work and contributing to its meaning through the active process of readerly digestion.

The citations in the margins are Barthes’s gesture at acknowledging the source of an idea, and in this way he maintains, however ambivalently, the status of an author (or of a text, as when he references the *Symposium* instead of Plato or *Werther* instead of Goethe) as originary. His references are intended less as “authoritative” and academic than as “amical” and friendly. His approach to referencing is more playful than scholarly references typically are, affectively charged and formally experimental. Barthes writes that the names and titles he cites in the margins mark, for him, his recollection of an idea that “has seduced, convinced, or ... momentarily given the delight of understanding (of being understood?).”<sup>22</sup> The moment that a text resonates with the understanding—that faculty of reason we saw Kant (and Piper) seeking to conceptualize through performance in chapter 1—is also a moment of “being understood.” Citation, placed next to memory, becomes a way of making one’s life intelligible.

*A Lover’s Discourse* maintains that one becomes interpellated by the discourse of love when one is in love or loved by someone who is in love. Through autotheoretical vignettes organized by a given word (“image/image,” or “magic/magic”) and a phrase (“I am crazy” for “fou/mad,” or “I am odious” for “monstreux/monstrous”), Barthes reflects on the

discourse of love as someone who is performatively interpellated by this discourse and, accordingly, is vulnerable and emotional. Ultimately, Barthes presents the lover's discourse as a paradox: on the one hand, the language of lovers can be rendered theoretically; on the other hand, this language is an extradiscursive affective experience that exceeds the terms and parameters of discourse as linguistic and semiotic.

By framing the language of love as a practice of theory, on par with other discourses investigated by theoretical heavyweights, Barthes lends the language of love and affection the weight of the academy. His references include names of philosophers and writers (or others with active writing practices). Most of the names Barthes cites are of European men, many of them French or German, including Nietzsche, Freud, Goethe, Proust, Winnicott, Lacan, Rousseau, Balzac, and de Sade. With Freud and Nietzsche present, Barthes's citations gather the progenitors of what is called contemporary "theory," or the critical tradition that Paul Ricoeur calls "the hermeneutics of suspicion."<sup>23</sup> In so doing, Barthes positions this discourse of love within a certain intellectual lineage or canon of theory as upheld in the West, writing as a structuralist-turned-poststructuralist who flirts with the autotheoretical, in different ways, throughout his life.

Nelson extends the Barthesian paradox of a lover's discourse in *The Argonauts*, where she attempts to inscribe the affects and philosophical problems of her own experience of being in love with a trans man in Proposition 8-era California. Within the citational and poetic field of *The Argonauts*, Nelson renders her love interest, Dodge Dodge, as both the subject and object of her (lover's) discourse. Extending the form and themes that Barthes introduced in *A Lover's Discourse* in 1977, Nelson interpellates Dodge in the early twenty-first century within her text; she also includes Dodge as a citation among other citations (names of theorists, writers) in the discursive framework that undergirds *The Argonauts* as autotheoretical. Nelson borrows from Barthes's text both in form and content, citing some of the same names that he does—Lacan makes an appearance, as does Winnicott. But just as Barthes draws references from the context he is writing in (the 1970s literary theory scene in France, during the shift from structuralism to poststructuralism), Nelson draws references from her context of writing—poetry and literature, as well as post-third-wave feminist and queer theory.

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As Nelson's citational practice moves along through the text of *The Argonauts*, we can see how contemporary theory has diversified and taken shape in different subsets of theoretical practices over the past few decades. There is representation from some key poststructuralist theorists (Deleuze, Foucault, Butler), psychoanalysts and psychologists (Donald Winnicott, William James), French feminists (Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Monique Wittig), and other feminist theorists, many who write on art, photography, and film (Susan Fraiman, Susan Sontag). Barthes references the Tao and other Eastern practices and traditions, such as haiku; Nelson references American Tibetan Buddhist Pema Chödrön, as well as other American figures who have written on Buddhism in a Western context, including Allen Ginsberg and Dodie Bellamy. Nelson cites the names of canonical queer theorists both past and present—Foucault, Butler, Bersani, Preciado—along with queer affect theorists and phenomenologists Sedgwick, Sara Ahmed, and Eula Biss. She cites poets such as Eileen Myles, Denise Riley, Lucille Clifton, and Anne Carson, and the dance artist Deborah Hay. Ginsberg and Deleuze haunt the text, coming to the fore in relation to the women with whom they were in writerly relationships. In the case of Ginsberg, Nelson shifts attention to the poet's mother, with the citation "Naomi Ginsberg, to Allen" giving a gestural voice to Naomi (for whom Ginsberg wrote his famous poem "*Kaddish*" as part of his mourning process).<sup>24</sup> For Deleuze, it is Claire Parnet, with whom he cowrote *Dialogues* in 1977: they return as a coupled citation throughout *The Argonauts* as Nelson explicates her anxieties around collaboration and authorial merging in the context of her writing practice.

Even as she writes from her own "I," Nelson positions her book as existing fundamentally *for* Dodge. Paul B. Preciado makes a similar move in *Testo Yonqui (Testo Junkie)* (2008)—the book from which Nelson takes the term "autotheory"—positioning their book as existing for one specific, and absent, reader. "You're the only one who could read this book," Preciado writes in an apostrophe to Guillaume Dustan, a gay French writer who died of an unintentional drug overdose in 2005.<sup>25</sup> Nelson's performative use of citations in *The Argonauts* fosters intimacy at the level of form; extending this to the themes of her text, Nelson frames the practice of sharing theory (as well as other texts, such as literature and poems) as an intimate, meaningful act between two queer lovers. On both levels,



queer intertextuality engenders space for intersubjective and reparative relations.

Yet the loved or beloved other occupies an ambivalent space in *The Argonauts*, just as in *A Lover's Discourse*. In both texts, the dialogic is invoked: as writers and theorists, both Barthes and Nelson are concerned with issues pertaining to relationships; both approach these issues autotheoretically, through topics of language, philosophy, and (to different extents and effects) queerness; both invoke a space of polyvocality through citation. And yet both take on the position of singular author rather than, say, writing the text as a collaboration (as in the case of Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue, discussed in the next chapter) or as a sustained conversation between two “equals” (as in Kathy Acker’s and McKenzie Wark’s transcribed email exchanges in *I'm Very into You: Correspondences 1995–1996*<sup>26</sup>). Nelson is self-aware about her anxieties around sharing authorship; the situation is especially charged when it comes to her writing about her lover as a trans person—since, at least until quite recently, with the increased visibility and public support of trans writers, trans subjectivities were often precluded from writing themselves in philosophy. Dodge will later write his own autotheoretical book, *My Meteorite*, published in 2020, that is a similarly genre-defying, postmemoir work in which Dodge writes through the death of his father, the multiplicity of kinds of love (riffing, as Nelson does, on Barthes), and finding meaning amidst randomness in a world of entropic chaos.<sup>27</sup>

#### COMPARATIVE LIFE-READING: INTERTEXTUAL INTIMACY AND IDENTIFICATION

While the term “autotheory” foregrounds the “auto” (or *autos*, self), many works approach this self in relationship to others, theorizing relationships through autotheoretical modes. In 2018, during a three-part panel titled “The Rise of Autotheory Inside and Outside the Academy” on which I participated at the ACLA convention in Los Angeles, my colleague and friend Alex Brostoff thoughtfully described the sociality of autotheory in her paper “Toward an Autotheory of Intertextual Kinship.” In this paper, which focuses on *The Argonauts* and *Testo Junkie*, Brostoff makes the apt point that “autotheory” is, in fact, “a misnomer.”<sup>28</sup> The autobiographical relation to

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theory that Nelson develops in *The Argonauts* is highly mediated through and dependent on the intersubjective, marked by the insistence of communication and intimacy, both with the figures in her life and with her theoretical forebears. The act of citing theory becomes a way to better understand one's experience in the world and, at the same time, to provide insights gained from that experience into sexuality, politics, art, family, community, and other topics.

Through formal play, Nelson underscores the ways that her writing self—the narrator and the character “Maggie Nelson”—operates and writes in undeniable proximity to others. It doesn't matter whether these are others with whom she is intimately involved as a lover or whom she “knows” through texts as a reader. Such transtextual relationships take place within, across, and beside other human beings, stories, and texts, and the writer cites each in turn.

We find this approach in earlier autotheoretical writings, such as Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. In it, Anzaldúa, writes “towards a new consciousness”—“*la conciencia de la mestiza*”—and cites Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos Calderón's theory of “*la raza cósmica*” alongside her experience as a self-identified “mestiza” to elucidate this consciousness.<sup>29</sup> Anzaldúa incorporates endnotes—typically used in academic work—into her creative-critical work to engender a space for queer, feminist, mestiza-becoming that engages citations as a reading list and a diverse intertextual undergirding for her personal-poetic-theoretical narrations. She finds philosophical and political allies in Calderón and others, such as Irena Klepfisz and Isabel Parra, next to whom she can write her autotheoretical invocation of “the Borderlands”—as land, as ontology, as consciousness, as epistemology, as relationship with an other, as multilingual translation and communication, as Indigenous becoming. While Nelson cites her lover, Dodge, in the margins of *The Argonauts*, Anzaldúa cites herself, framing chapter 4 of *Borderlands*, “*Cihuatl*otl, Woman Alone,” with one of her short poems as an epigraph; the name “Gloria Anzaldúa” is credited as the speaker, in an act of self-citation that becomes, effectively, an act of self-determination and self-respect. Anzaldúa takes space in her book to recognize her work as work and her poetry as poetry—a move that brings to mind “self-care,” in Lorde's sense, according to which it is “an act of political warfare” for the marginalized—willful survival and

self-assertion in spaces that have been hostile to them.<sup>30</sup> In conceptualizing self-care, which might easily be co-opted by neoliberalism and capitalism, as a collective and liberatory form of care for the self, Lorde provides intersectional feminists with a framework for self-care that is truly empowering.

Much of the power *The Argonauts* lies in Nelson's processing theoretical ideas and modes of thinking and writing through her own particular experience in the world as queer, as a stepmother and a biological mother, as a lover of Dodge, and as a now-sober woman in recovery from alcoholism. Nelson's choice of citations is specific to her life circumstances and the questions she takes up. In autotheory, writers and artists join lived experiences to intertextual references—to the history of art, literature, philosophy, film, and pop culture—as part of the development of a theory. I term this epistemological shuttling “intertextual identification” and “intertextual intimacy.” It denotes a tendency for those working autotheoretically to draw parallels between their own experiences and the experiences of others, using the similarity between their lives and others' lives as the basis for choosing the examples they cite. Often, though not always, this intertextual identification—that moment of seeing oneself in an other, or recognizing one's experiences in a new way—coexists with the para-academic uses of citations and references as a way of acknowledging the source of knowledge or influence in one's work.

Intertextual intimacy and intertextual identification describe a way of reading, a way of writing and making work, and a way of referencing or placing *alongside*. The autotheorist reads and chooses citations they identify with, or that resonate with their experience; they then propose a hypothesis or *theory* based on the evidence provided by their life—the “auto”—and others'. Both the “auto” and the “theoretical” allow them to process particular questions and ideas, whether personal or philosophical—or, most often, *both at once*. The artist's life becomes a kind of “life-text” to be cited alongside other citations as a way of developing and advancing a theory; self and life become material through which to explore questions, form theories, and “test” them against different forms of evidencing, whether anecdotal, political, social, art historical, literary, pop cultural, or some other form. In autotheoretical works by writers like Kraus, Rankine, Als, and Masha Tupitsyn and artists and filmmakers such as Moyra Davey and Cauleen Smith, intertextual identification names less

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a specific practice than a general tendency to read texts—and the lives and mythologies associated with them—as a way to better understand their own lives. In Davey’s *Les Goddesses*, the artist places an autofictionalized story about herself and her siblings next to the story of Mary Wollstonecraft and Percy Bysshe Shelley, citing around them a cross-historical coterie of other thinkers, such as Goethe and Susan Sontag (in reference to Marguerite Duras, Davey utters aloud: “She had stamina, as Sontag would say, and she was not afraid of the wet”<sup>31</sup>).

Nelson theorizes jealousy through the perspective of her own lived experiences of feeling jealous in her relationship with Dodge. She lends herself gravity by positioning her own anecdotes beside ones from queer and feminist literary figureheads she respects, such as Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. Committed to the project of releasing herself from jealousy’s grip, Nelson processes a problem that is both philosophical (what is the nature of jealousy?) and personal (Nelson is troubled by her experiences of jealousy in her relationship with Dodge) while turning to texts (lives and works) from history to gain perspective on and insight into the topic. Insofar as *The Argonauts* is focused on couples, it is not surprising that Nelson looks to literary and artistic couples and duos from history: Stein and Toklas, George and Mary Oppen, Deleuze and Parnet. Nelson finds strange solace in stories of jealousy existing between Toklas and Stein; with the comfort of body-minds she respects, Nelson can rest assured that she is not alone in feeling queer jealousy. In this way, intertextual intimacy and identification is as much a gut-propelled, self-protective drive as it is a drive to critically process and reflect. Citation becomes an evidencing of the philosophical movement from the individual to something closer to the universal—other people whose work I respect have gone through this or have felt what I have felt. This might be jealousy in a queer romantic relationship (Nelson) or self-starvation as a mode of rejecting patriarchy’s cynicism (Kraus, seeing herself in Simone Weil).<sup>32</sup>

#### AUTOTHEORIZING TRANS-FORMATION

One of the most memorable and frequently quoted lines from *The Argonauts* is Nelson’s description of the “many-gendered mothers of my heart,” in

reference to theorists like Sedgwick and Barthes and the others whom she cites.<sup>33</sup> Nelson borrows this line from American poet Dana Ward to describe the people who influence her writing and her life—practices that are, for the autotheorist, inextricably interwoven. The description of “mothers”—maternal figures with offspring—as “many-gendered” continues Nelson’s queering of motherhood, decoupling the mother as a parental figure from its etymological/ontological associations with cis women. By foregrounding these figures as being “of my heart,” Nelson makes affective the citational practice that structures her reading and writing.

Other arguments that Nelson advances around philosophy and motherhood, such as the incisive statement that “in its rage at maternal finitude, the child turns to an all-powerful patriarch—God—who, by definition, cannot let anyone down,”<sup>34</sup> are not so much her own invention as her rearticulation of arguments previously made by others. (In this instance, the argument is one Kaja Silverman makes in *Flesh of My Flesh*, and Nelson references accordingly). A decentered and multiply citational mode of writing supplants the singular (male) author as genius or inventor, in which patriarchy has historically been so invested. This decentered view of the writer or artist is by no means a solely feminist one—it was Barthes who popularized this view with “The Death of the Author,” one of the theoretical-essay-cum-manifestos recognized as inaugurating the shift from structuralism to poststructuralism in twentieth-century theory scenes. And yet works like *The Argonauts* are conflicted when it comes to decentering the “self,” and ideas of solo authorship and ownership over a narrative or a text.

In some ways, *The Argonauts* is a trans narrative written from the perspective of someone who loves a trans person (instead of someone who *is* a trans person)—a cisgender woman in a partnered relationship with a trans man. Nelson positions the book as a devotional testament of love for Dodge. Through her choice of citations, the book becomes a space where queer feminist voices convene around questions related to sexuality, family-making, and relationships. And yet, as critics have noted, for all of *The Argonauts*’ attention on Dodge, Dodge himself remains strangely silent in the text—arguably, in ways, even exploited. Nelson takes her writerly approach from Barthes, who describes his method in the *A Lover’s Discourse* as creating a space where the narrator is “speaking within himself, *amorously*,

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confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak.”<sup>35</sup> Writing in a late postmodern literary context, Nelson is self-aware of the problems that come with writing about another known and named person; her decision to choose Barthesian solipsism to write about her queer love is curious, and underlines the pull of “autotheory” as an orientation that allows the writer a degree of comfort and agency in the respective freedom of their own *self*-knowledge (in the sense of “this was my experience, and all I can do is write from the relative confines of my experience”).

Nelson also finds herself within the trans narrative. Much of the focus of *The Argonauts* is a philosophical project of queering the pregnant body. Nelson does this by placing her narrative of pregnancy alongside the narrative of Dodge’s female-to-male gender transformation, using citation to engender similarities. Nelson presents a queer narrative of two bodies transforming in close proximity to each other: turning to autotheoretical strategies of intertextual intimacy and identification, the quintessentially “queer” narrative of Dodge’s transformation on testosterone is juxtaposed with the supposedly “normative” narrative of Maggie’s pregnant body: as Nelson writes, “Our bodies grew stranger, to ourselves, to each other.”<sup>36</sup> Theorizing the ontology of pregnancy in a postphenomenological mode, Nelson asks: “How can an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolize or enact the ultimate conformity? Or is this just another disqualification of anything tied too closely to the female animal from the privileged term (in this case, nonconformity, or radicality)?”<sup>37</sup> By placing her own experience of being pregnant beside her partner Dodge’s experience of gender transitioning, Nelson attempts to queer the boundary between the normative and the radical, the so-called homonormative and the more transgressively “queer.” She takes assumptions within twenty-first-century queer discourse and deconstructs them through her autotheoretical reasoning—for example, the assumption that the transgender body represents a “queerer” ontological state while the cisgender pregnant female body represents “normativity” (extending Butler’s notion of compulsory heterosexuality to heteronormative reproductive futurity in the Edelmanian sense).

Along with this queering of the pregnant body comes a queering of the antisocial turn as it exists in queer theory via Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman. Nelson’s writing brings a feminist approach to the language



and frameworks of a gay-male-authored canon of queer theory and its politics of refusal that emerges from both the new precarity politics of the left (*The Argonauts*) and masculine avant-garde traditions of extremism and violence in performance (*The Art of Cruelty*). We can read Nelson's writings as deconstructing dominant discourses in purportedly experimental and progressive spaces through a queer feminist perspective. Yet the view that there is something quintessentially more queer haunts the text, even as Nelson, following Sedgwick's lead, seeks to get beyond binary thinking. Indeed, on some level this text reads as a defense of Nelson's own queerness, first in spite of and later—through an autotheoretical reasoning that draws on feminist theorist Jane Gallop's anecdotal theory and gender studies scholar Fraiman's notion of "sodomitical maternity"<sup>38</sup>—because of her status as a cisgender queer pregnant woman who rejects both homophobic heteronormativity and antisocial calls for queer negativity.

One of the most complicated, unresolved passages in *The Argonauts* is when Nelson relates her and Dodge's exchange after she shares a draft of the book with him to read. Nelson acknowledges the issue of consent, but then quickly dismisses it in favor of a philosophy of writing practice that emphasizes the "free expression" of the speaking "I" above the feelings of the other.<sup>39</sup> Following Sedgwick, Nelson places honesty (whatever honesty may mean in a philosophical sense, rooted as it is in the speaking self who believes herself to be honest) above other drives, advocating acknowledging the complications of discomfort and other difficult feelings while nevertheless proceeding with one's project. In this passage Nelson alternates between an acknowledgment of the "politically on point," or perhaps "best feminist practices," way of going about things in the twenty-first-century context of feminism—whose framework of intersectionality can at its most cynical become a kind of hierarchy that gives voice only to those who can present themselves as most oppressed—and a concession to her own desires.

When Dodge tells Maggie that "he feels unbeheld—unheld even," Nelson does not change her course; instead, she is honest about how she bristles against Dodge's words, and how she realizes that she *should* be receptive, even if she isn't going to be. "I try to listen, try to focus on his generosity in letting me write about him at all," Nelson writes, yet she concedes that this "generosity" is not generous enough for her: "How can

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a book be both a free expression and a negotiation?” She recalls when they used to speak about writing a book together: “It was to be titled *Proximity*. Its ethos would derive from *Dialogues II*, co-authored by Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet.”<sup>40</sup> For Nelson, these social and ethical issues are inextricable from philosophical issues related to writing. She admits that as a writer, she has not figured out what it would look like to write in a way that adequately holds both the self and the other; the self-consciously citational structure of the text, which formalizes the autotheoretical move quite literally and visually on the mise-en-page, might be her attempt to do so.

Like many others involved in the autotheoretical turn, Nelson employs lateral citation. To cite laterally means to cite one’s peers, friends, cohort, or colleagues instead of citing only upward—established philosophers, scholars with tenure, and so on. In the denouement of *The Argonauts*, Nelson cites the name “Dodge” three times in the margins;<sup>41</sup> here, the name of Nelson’s partner takes up textual space as a “legitimate” citation alongside the names of heavy-hitter theorists. At the same time, there is a rhetorical difference between when Nelson cites Dodge and when Nelson cites someone else. She refers to Dodge by first name only, distinguishing Dodge, the beloved, from theorists like “Beatriz Preciado” or “Michel Foucault,” who are referred to by first name and surname.

Part of a feminist and queer feminist citation practice involves destabilizing hierarchies of influence as a movement toward a relational politics. By concluding her practice of citing texts with citations of “Dodge,” Nelson brings the text, as an homage to Dodge (or to her feelings of love for Dodge, two different but related matters), to a kind of closure. In an interview after the book’s publication, Nelson pointed to writers she respects who engage in a similar practice of citation; she noted that Eula Biss, for example, “quotes her sister with as much gravity as she quotes a philosopher.”<sup>42</sup> The lifelong collaboration between Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore and her sister Florene Belmore comes to mind here, too, with Florene writing on her sister’s art after years of working in close partnership with Rebecca as friend and family as well as an installation support person who travels with her to international biennales and provides feedback on her work; in terms of intimacy, Florene’s art writing and criticism brings to mind the spirit of Randolph’s fictocriticism in 1980s Toronto, with Florene’s work being tied to an Indigenous kinship

network that challenges Western, colonial conceptions of critical distance and professional boundaries. The two dramatized this through the conceit of staging a private conversation in public, reflecting on their longterm collaboration in relation to ideas of experimenting with criticism from an Anishinaabekwe viewpoint.<sup>43</sup>

But for all the utopic feminist potentiality of collaboration in theory, Nelson admits that the very thought of such authorial “merging” causes her “too much anxiety” to move forward with the idea. And so she continues to write as the singular author, citing others as part of her story. She is honest about the resistance she feels to “los[ing] sight of my own me,” and returns instead to autotheory as a practice grounded as much in her own experience as in the experiences of the theorists, poets, and lovers she cites.<sup>44</sup> While not unique in these feelings, Nelson might be in the specificities of her candor. In speaking about a recent project that involves conversations with family members in Jordan, the writer and artist Mira Mattar put it this way: “I wanted inter-subjectivity without enmeshment.”<sup>45</sup> In many autotheoretical works there is a desire to theorize one’s life, intersubjective as it is, but also a desire to maintain the boundaries of the “self” as separate from others. Not unlike Adrian Piper’s ritualistic turn to the mirror when faced with the anxieties of losing oneself brought on by reading Kant in isolation (see chapter 1), Nelson’s anxieties stem in part from the gap between good feminist practice and her need for something messier and more honestly intersubjective in its relations and stakes. “I’m not saying this is good pedagogy,” Nelson states after joyfully acknowledging that “I can talk as much as I want to” in her role as a professor. “I’m saying that its pleasures are deep.”<sup>46</sup> Is feminist autotheory a space where the pleasures of theorizing meet the pleasures of candor? With Nelson’s admission, autotheory is that place where the pleasures of practicing theory meet the pleasures of telling one’s story, or of relaying—with an attempt at *honesty*—how one really views one’s lived actions and behaviors in the world, regardless of what another person thinks. So how does the disclosing of truths, and the pursuit of “truth,” relate to the autotheoretical practice of theorizing, especially when it comes to feminist and queer feminist modes of being in relation with others in consensual, ethical, life-affirming ways?

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## IDENTITIES' LIMITS: PERMISSIBILITY AND SELF-IDENTIFICATION

While *The Argonauts* announces its proximity to the work of Barthes in its title and its form, Nelson's greatest theoretical affinity is with the work of Sedgwick. In its embryonic stage, *The Argonauts* began as three inter-related texts: a talk that Nelson gave on Sedgwick, a review she wrote of Sedgwick's posthumously published *The Weather in Proust* (2011), and an exhibition essay that she wrote on the American cross-medial artist A. L. Steiner's 2012 exhibition, *Puppies and Babies*.<sup>47</sup> Adding another intertextual layer, I first read *The Argonauts* in 2015, the year it was published, which was also the same year that Nelson's partner Dodge Dodge had his solo exhibition at WallSpace in New York, an exhibition that took its name, *The Cybernetic Fold*, from Sedgwick's 1995 essay "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins." With two decades separating the essay and Dodge's art show, it is clear that the ideas Sedgwick was engaging in her mode of practicing theory—a mode often referred to as queer feminist affect theory, and that is often autotheoretical in its personal-critical orientation—are still abuzz.

What does theory know? Sedgwick's essay, written with her collaborator and former student Adam Frank, opens with "Here are a few things theory knows today":

Or, to phrase it more fairly, here are a few broad assumptions that shape the heuristic habits and positing procedures of theory today (theory not in the primary theoretical texts, but in the routinizing critical projects of "applied theory"; theory as a broad project that now spans the humanities and extends into history and anthropology; theory after Foucault and Greenblatt, after Freud and Lacan, after Levi-Strauss, after Derrida, after feminism) when it offers any account of human beings or cultures.<sup>48</sup>

What follows is a coy summation of the characteristics of contemporary theory in its manifestation as a form of "applied theory" that has, as Sedgwick and Frank suggest, become quite prescriptive. To practice good theory, for example, one knows that in order to understand representation, language and discourse should be elevated above all else, and that one must be fiercely anti-essentialist by sufficiently distancing oneself from

any recourse to biology. Sedgwick and Frank then describe their theoretical alignments in the article, turning to the 1960s American psychologist and theorist Silvan Tomkins, whose work on affect guides their theorizing of shame. Aware of the taboos of their alignments—a perceived lack of loyalty to the poststructuralist prescriptions aligned above—Sedgwick and Frank position themselves as outsiders or “queer” *theorists*—theorists who are, in fact, actively *queering* theory through their unfashionable critical positionings: “You don’t have to be long out of theory kindergarten to make mincemeat of, let’s say, a psychology that depends on the separate existence of eight ... distinct affects hardwired into the human biological system.”<sup>49</sup> The writers position themselves as outsiders to what is properly “theoretical,” even while their article is published in *Critical Inquiry*, a reputable, peer-reviewed journal of theory and criticism.

In Sedgwick’s 1999 biographical study, *A Dialogue on Love*, written a few years after “Shame,” she wrote through her experience of depression after undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer. The text is constructed around her psychotherapy sessions with her male therapist; her intersubjective mode of relating to, and conversing with, her therapist forms the premise of this “dialogue.” As Katy Hawkins puts it, *A Dialogue on Love* engages an “experimentation with form” as a way to “[facilitate] new ways of understanding bodily crisis”: “Sedgwick’s approach to metastatic breast cancer develops the theoretical concepts from across her oeuvre.”<sup>50</sup> At the heart of Sedgwick’s contribution to the expanding field of contemporary theory is her open and honest practice of theory in ways that seek to transgress convention, even as her own privileged positioning as a literary scholar trained within the halls of the Ivy League might complicate her claims to outsider status.

As we consider questions of access and legitimacy around autotheory as a feminist approach to scholarship, it is noteworthy that Sedgwick had first to prove herself academically through more conventional literary scholarship on nineteenth-century writers like Henry James before she was able to theorize issues related to gay lives<sup>51</sup> and, later, to theorize queerness in weird modes of writing that bridge the self-reflexively autobiographical, the lyrical, the theoretical, the psychoanalytic, and the performative. Just as Sedgwick challenges acceptable ways of doing theory, so too she challenges acceptable ways of identifying—even within the most “queer”

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and “radical” LGBTQIA2S+ spaces. Identifying as a fat woman and a gay man and immersing herself in a lived practice of theorizing and feeling queerness while being in a long-term and ostensibly monogamous marriage with a cisgender man, Sedgwick destabilizes understandings of the relationships between queerness, desire, and identification.

Quite famously, Sedgwick proposed a new definition of “queer” that would continue to resound in queer communities decades after she coined it: queer as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.”<sup>52</sup> Sedgwick’s overtly (or overly?) capacious definition—one that creates some distance between queerness and sexual orientation—has come to shape definitions of queerness in queer theory and popular culture in a way that is, to this day, contended. Is everything queer? Can (or should) everything be (capable of being) queer—or queered? Sedgwick’s conscious traversing identifications—a fat woman, a gay man—could just as easily be taken as an extension of calls to destabilize gender and to claim ways of being in the world that are more fluid and nonconforming, rather than as politically unintelligible in the current discourse of queer feminisms. Sedgwick theorized queerness from an ambiguous gender identity at a time when trans writers and theorists, while very much a part of gay life and actively making work, did not have the same visibility in popular culture or academia as they do now.<sup>53</sup> Less binarized gender identifications and sexual orientations, including non-binary, pansexual, and genderqueer, were not a part of the conversation in 1980s and 1990s queer theory in the way that they are in the 2010s, and one wonders how Sedgwick’s language might change if she were alive and writing and feeling and flirting today.

When it comes to subjectivity and becoming, is there such thing as identificatory limits? How do we parse the distinction between identifying as and identifying with, specifically in regard to queer feminist politics? Nelson’s identification of pregnancy as queer, a move she makes through the use of “trans” as a kind of citational conceit, is perhaps less contentious than the fluidity of identifications and desires advanced by Sedgwick’s autotheoretical work. Nelson’s conceptualization follows from



Butler's Derridean decoupling of desire and identification in favor of a more binary-blurring and performative conception of gender. As a mode of writing through the self as relational, autotheory seems particularly well equipped to flesh out the nuances of such complicated identifications, even as it also presents problems related to identification and relationality. Writers and theorists can suspend existing conceptions of appropriate identifications—even within more progressive and/or transgressive spaces, such as queer politics—as autotheorists writing from a first-person positioning and disclosing identifications (and identifications-desires) that obfuscate what is appropriate for or to them.

Sedgwick's self-identifications have not been warmly welcomed by either her own or the current queer context, a matter Nelson ruminates on within the intertextual and autotheoretical fabric of *The Argonauts*.<sup>54</sup> Nelson sees this scenario as close to her own, given her experience of pregnancy. The issue, returned to throughout Nelson's book, is whether pregnancy for a cisgender woman can be understood as properly queer, whatever that might mean, even as she is a queer woman in a relationship with a trans man. Nelson turns to Sedgwick's work and its receptions to engage the problematics of what "queer" means in the contemporary moment. She contextualizes her inquiry from within her queer marriage to Dodge and their family-making in Proposition 8-era California, and moves smoothly between references—Ahmed, Sontag, Bersani, Chödrön—arriving finally at Sedgwick. It is Sedgwick's definition of "queer" as "wanting it both ways" that most resonates with Nelson, enabling her to keep queerness grounded in sexual orientation while also distancing the two. "There is much to be learned from wanting something both ways," Nelson writes in one of the text's many moments of relishing in ambivalence. Throughout the text, Nelson reminds us that the work of theory is to flesh out liminal spaces, to resist generalizations, and to sit with ambivalence. Paradoxically, there is also a palpable desire to get at the "truth" as part of her epistemological-ethical project of autotheoretical queer theorizing. Nelson cites Sedgwick's statement that "what it takes—all it takes—to make the description 'queer' a true one is the impulsion *to* use it in the first person," following this with a description of Sedgwick's first-person identifications in her own "real life":

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Sedgwick, who was long married to a man with whom she had, by her own description, mostly postshower, vanilla sex, knew about the possibilities of this first-person use of the term perhaps better than anyone else. She took heat for it, just as she took heat for identifying with gay men (not to mention *as* a gay man), and for giving lesbians not much more than an occasional nod.<sup>55</sup>

Nelson uses the practice of autotheory to seek insight into the age-old question of truth: what is truth, how do we access truth, what makes something truthful, and so on. The discourses of honesty and, perhaps even more fraught, sincerity present complications to philosophical and epistemological questions of truth. Nelson follows these observations on Sedgwick's "queer" identifications with the conclusion that "such were Sedgwick's identifications and interests; she was nothing if not honest." She invokes pathos for Sedgwick and a soft allegiance with what she was doing, intimating that Sedgwick's way of living was more sincerely queer "than the poles of masculinity and femininity could ever allow."<sup>56</sup> Writing alongside Sedgwick and other ghosts of queer theory's past, Nelson extends her project of troubling binary oppositions around gender, sexuality, and identity while also upholding her insistence on honesty and sincerity. Nelson, too, desires a space for "honesty" and "truth," even as these terms are themselves impossible, looming as a horizon a writer might move toward but never touch.

#### AUTO THEORY'S OTHERS: WHAT STORY IS MINE TO TELL?

The rise of autotheory is wrapped up in ethical questions around writing and art: Whose story is yours to tell? What are the parameters of your "I," and are you speaking within those bounds? If your truth is your truth and my truth is my truth, then whose truth is *truth*? Nelson makes an effort to bring a lived ethics to the space of theory (and vice versa), using the forms of a queer, feminist, autotheoretical practice to do so; one of the ways she does this is through disclosing her weaknesses and her desire to grow and become more emotionally mature in her relationship.

But what stories is an "I" able, or permitted, to tell? Can Nelson write about trans subjectivities and politics if she is not trans? Similar questions have emerged in recent years: Can a nontrans actor can be cast in

the role of a trans character (thereby taking that role from a potential trans actor, some would argue)? Can a nonIndigenous writer write a story about indigeneity? If we push this further, we reach certain questions that are familiar in the mainstream, such as whether a male author can write a female protagonist, and so on.

The ethical questions around autotheory and authorship that Nelson gestures to in *The Argonauts* are taken up directly in Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012), the graphic artist's second graphic novel, which can best be described as autotheoretical.<sup>57</sup> In it, Bechdel homes in on her relationship with her mother in light of questions around queer-ness, writing, influence, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, canonicity, and time. A key problem Bechdel returns to throughout is the problem of writing *truthfully*, from life, about a loved one. What does it mean to write these stories and publish them in forms that can be widely read? *Are You My Mother?* is often described as a graphic memoir, a genre description that has been used to describe Bechdel's 2007 work *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, a queer coming-of-age story that centers on her relationship with her father, a closeted gay man who ran a funeral home.<sup>58</sup>

Before writing book-length graphic memoirs, Bechdel was known for her autobiographically-inspired comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983–).<sup>59</sup> Bechdel structures the book through intertextual identification and an ensuing parallel narrative structure of layered citations, positioning the narrative of her relationship with her mother alongside narratives from throughout history that she finds generative points of connection with: these include the life stories of Winnicott, Virginia Woolf, and Adrienne Rich. Some of the stories press up against Bechdel's own life (her rejection letter from Rich, for example, becomes a motivating event in the story).

Identifying with Woolf's proclaimed "obsession" with her parents, for example, Bechdel places Woolf's process of writing *To The Lighthouse* beside her own process of writing the book *Are You My Mother?*<sup>60</sup> Bechdel extracts similarities and theorizes them as she considers broader philosophical questions around autobiography and feminist writing practice. Just as Nelson and Dodge are divided on issues of language and writing, Bechdel and her mother are divided on the proper place of the autobiographical "self" in writing. Bechdel's mother, like literary critic Helen Vendler (whom Bechdel cites), is of the view that "some things are private"

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and “the self has no place in good writing.”<sup>61</sup> Bechdel, on the other hand, says that sometimes you have to be personal and specific in order to be universal. She delves into these “private” matters in her graphic novels—first the story of her father’s queerness and suicide in *Fun Home*, and now the story of her strained relationship with her mother. Like Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera* and Nelson in *The Argonauts*, Bechdel enlivens citations as a way of better understanding philosophical questions and fostering intersubjective relationships between different lives, texts, histories, and contexts—ones related in life, and ones related through reading.

Not only does Bechdel acknowledge that she is going against her mother’s wishes by writing about her, she also includes in the book the protracted process of her unpacking these issues during private sessions with her psychotherapist. In this effort at taking moral responsibility, Bechdel makes transparent her process of wrestling with these questions. Like Nelson, she brings a candor to her work by including her loved ones’ responses to a text in the text itself. Through parallelism of narratives, characters, concepts, and artworks, their autotheoretical texts place “personal” experience within a greater discursive, social, and political context, grappling with these questions in similarly personal-critical ways.

Honesty and truth are slippery terms. Like sincerity, honesty is difficult to talk about when it comes to performative, post-conceptual-art practices. One way to do so is to consider honesty as its own rhetoric, one the writer or artist performs to different effects. Speaking of “personal criticism”—a marginal practice that feminist academics dabbled in alongside more legitimized modes of doing scholarship in the 1980s and early 1990s—Nancy K. Miller states:

By the risks of its writing, personal criticism embodies a pact, like the “autobiographical pact” binding writer to reader in the fabrication of self-truth, that what is at stake matters also to others: somewhere in the self-fiction of the personal voice is a belief that the writing is worth the risk. In this sense, by turning its authorial voice into spectacle, personal writing theorizes the stakes of its own performance: a personal materialism.<sup>62</sup>

Resembling autotheory in its impulses and effects, Miller’s personal criticism is predicated on the formation of a relationship between writer

and reader. Like a good postmodernist, Miller understands that any kind of subjective writing practice is performative: the writing “I” constitutes itself through the act of writing. Yet there is a generative tension between “the fabrication of self-truth,” on the one hand, and “the self-fiction of the personal voice” on the other, a tension we find both in personal criticism and in more recent autotheoretical texts. Something that autotheory might be better positioned to do than such genres as memoir is the reflexive act of “turning its authorial voice into spectacle” and, in turn, “[theorizing] the stakes of its own performance.” Considered in this light, Nelson’s disclosures of her faulty thoughts and limitations might not be meant to rouse pathos or preemptively protect herself from criticism so much as to establish the performative “personal materialism” that Miller speaks of. Nelson theorizes the stakes of her own disclosures (considered within the larger contexts in which she writes) through the act of disclosing.

The use of transparency—or, to put it another way, disclosure—in feminist autotheoretical work varies greatly between writers. Although nearly two decades separate Kraus’s *I Love Dick* from Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, both books have received a great deal of attention from a twenty-first-century millennial readership. In chapter 5, I theorize the feminist politics of disclosure and exposure in *I Love Dick*, and the ways in which Kraus’s disclosing of the bad behavior of men is an echo of feminist “whisper networks” and a prophetic anticipation of the ultra-public #MeToo movement of today. In both texts, a female narrator addresses a beloved, and the beloved or “object of desire” to whom the text is addressed is a named and known public figure.

While Nelson’s narrative is grounded in her “actual” experience of being in a romantic, committed, and consensual relationship with Dodge, Kraus engages in a performative obsession, interpellating Dick as the driving conceit of her written text without his consent. Kraus’s heterosexual encounter with Dick could be read as a queering of heterosexuality through its hyperbolic, even campy parody, while Nelson explores a self-reflexively queer relationship with a partner who is “neither male nor female.” In both texts, the theoretical context of performativity (as developed by Butler) shapes an approach to hetero desire that is critical, with both writers approaching heterosexuality as a performative construct. And yet as readers we understand that the beloved other that Nelson invokes

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exists in a “reality” outside the text, whereas the “Dick” that Kraus invokes is grounded less in “reality” and more in a hyperbolic performance of the real—a “real” that touches on delusion (or is it metaphor?) and the perverse power dynamics of heterosexuality as they persist in the latter half of the 1990s. In this way, the ethical valences of the two books are different, and the writers take distinct tonal approaches in representing these relationships to readers.

Nelson distances herself from social media, going so far as to state, “Instantaneous, non-calibrated, digital self-revelation is one of my greatest nightmares.” She explains how her decision to disengage from social media as a mode of autotheoretical expression—where the internet continues to serve as a space for the long-standing feminist “personal made public”—comes from her anxieties around the “temptations and pressures” involved in having oneself “[hoisted] ... onto the stage of Facebook.”<sup>63</sup> Instead, Nelson writes herself and theorizes in the pages of a book, where there is a different kind of temporality—a slowness, perhaps—that gives room for more thoughtfulness and consideration.

But what is the rhetoric of honesty that Nelson engages in her writing? To what uses is this rhetoric being put in *The Argonauts*? Although both *The Argonauts* and *I Love Dick* engage in what could be called a feminist politics of disclosure, disclosure for Nelson is less about outing the bad behavior of others and more about disclosing her own limitations, problematics, complicities, and imperfections as a human being, as a partner, and as a writer. By positioning her work as driven by a Sedgwickian honesty, Nelson’s disclosures are more about revealing the slippages and gaps in contemporary practices of living, working, loving, writing, fucking, and theorizing as feminist and queer. Refusing to perform a perfectly correct feminism, Nelson makes space for the kinds of philosophical capaciousness and nonbinary (in the most literal sense) thinking that Sedgwick strove for. As it did for Sedgwick, this move has opened Nelson up to criticism—some, perhaps, deserved.

Over the course of *The Argonauts*, Nelson works autotheoretically to build an argument for her own queerness and legitimacy as a queer theorist (by autotheoretically engaging larger theoretical questions related to the ontology of queerness, family-making, and romance). In this way, Nelson’s practice could be described as straddling the reparative and

the paranoid. Reparative reading is Sedgwick's response to the limits of paranoid reading as a hegemonic mode in the academy: "The monopolistic program of paranoid knowing systematically disallows any explicit recourse to reparative motives, no sooner to be articulated than subject to methodical uprooting."<sup>64</sup> Because of its antihierarchical impetus and ameliorative nature, reparative reading, much like other critical feminist innovations, is vulnerable to dismissal as frivolous or unserious—especially in light of its drive toward unknowing.

Paranoid readings of *The Argonauts* are not difficult: I can just as quickly critique the problematics of Nelson's trans appropriations as I can the problematics of her appropriation (and preemptive defenses) in giving her white baby an Indigenous name at the book's close. I think much of the point of Nelson's text is the attempt to make space for the reparative as an indeterminate way of reading, writing, conversing, thinking, and theorizing in present-day queer communities, and yet I'm cognizant of how her rhetoric of honesty is a way of performing herself as someone who is relatable and self-aware as she constitutes her own politicized discourse of love for Dodge. Nelson's rhetorical performance of honesty becomes a preemptive shield, discreetly defending the writer from more predictable feminist criticisms. Nelson does this through establishing a trustworthy narrator who is upfront about her own limitations, a version of the "nobody is perfect" defense that circulates in political and pop cultural debates. As a reader, I am left with the resultant tension between the slipperiness of her evasion and the novel's keen contributions to an autotheoretical approach to writing.

Along with the problematics of honesty and disclosure is the tension between autobiography and fictionalization. As discussed, other queer feminists, such as Lorde and Anzaldúa, wrote their lives in similarly citational ways in the 1980s. Nicole Brossard's *Picture Theory* (1982), for example, is framed by a citation from Wittgenstein—in reference to his theory of language games—used as the book's title. Brossard plays with genre and form to write through lesbian relationships in autobiographical ways, though much of her work is put through the prism of fictionalization. The distinction between transmuting the *autobiographical* through the "fictional" is a difference between Brossard's writing of the 1970s–1980s and Nelson's of the 2010s, with 1990s works like Kraus's *I Love Dick* seeming a curious hinge between the two.

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In chapter 5, I discuss the ways Kraus critiques fictionalization as largely disingenuous in certain literary scenes throughout history: since many writers are writing about real-life events, fictionalizing them merely gives a false distance from the “personal” material it is based on, rendering the work more critically appreciated and protecting it from charges of narcissism. Kraus claims that most of the so-called fictional work written by men is actually based on real-life material, and that, for that reason, the tendency for canonized male authors to present such work as fiction is disingenuous at best. The feminist politics of the autobiographical, in tension with the theoretical and the fictional, is a key problem that pervades the autotheoretical—with the very notion of “autotheory” presenting an aporia.

#### AUTO THEORY AND ETHICS: BECOMING A (MORAL) SUBJECT

In the body of *The Argonauts*, the theoretical or literary citation is also invoked as a form of aspiration, like a memeable inspirational quote for the theoretically inclined. One of the texts that Nelson shares with Dodge in the text’s opening pages is “a fragment of a poem by Michael Ondaatje”; the poem, though unnamed in this book, is his “The Cinnamon Peeler.” On her choice of passage, which begins “Kissing the stomach / kissing your scarred / skin boat. History / is what you’ve travelled on / and take with you,” Nelson explains, “I didn’t send the fragment because I had in any way achieved its serenity. I sent it with the aspiration that one day I might—that one day my jealousy might recede, and I would be able to behold the names and images of others inked onto your skin without disjunct or distaste.”<sup>65</sup>

Nelson introduces the tension between who she is and who she hopes to be, positioning the practice of citation as aspiration as much as a description of past or present circumstances. Striving to be better, autotheoretical works like *The Argonauts* and Sheila Heti’s 2010 *How Should a Person Be?* engage ethical questions through the transcription of real-life anecdotes and conversations that the writer witnessed, overheard, participated in, or read, and then reappropriated in the context of their own work. Heti’s book, though better described as autofictional than autotheoretical, asks the question, “How should a person be?” to reflect on ways of being in the

world in a manner that sounds childlike, though written for adults.<sup>66</sup> In this way, these works return us to philosophy's roots—where philosophy is the practice of reflecting on how to live well (though the means by which one figures that out can paradoxically brush up against the aims).

Does being honest about one's own limitations and theoretical shortcomings in a text preemptively defend these shortcomings from criticism? Within the context of contemporary feminist theory and practice, is this kind of self-effacing honesty rhetorically or philosophically effective or subversive, or does it reinforce what is stereotypically expected of women? Ethical and political questions related to feminist disclosures and the act of writing with, to, for, or about an other are thorny, whether the author's or artist's approach is one of performative antagonism (Kraus vs. Dick) or of sincerity (which is also performative). Similar to the distinction Nelson draws between who she is and whom she hopes to become through the practice of thinking and writing autotheoretically, ideals of relationality, intersubjectivity, and intimacy exist in the text as the kinds of ideals she strives toward. Nelson admits her own deep-seated resistance to sharing authorship, even as she populates her text with the voices of others. But what about those practices where the loved one does speak? Or those practices where authorship is shared between collaborators? Related to questions of autotheory and incorporating others into one's work—the citational act as a move toward communion and intimacy, or disclosing as a means of holding folks responsible for their bad behavior through calling in or calling out—is the question of whether feminist autotheory constitutes a moral or ethical imperative.

The question of whether theorizing is an *ethical* practice is one I've been thinking through as I've considered the autotheoretical impulse as it manifests in contemporary cultural production—especially, it seems, in feminist, queer, and BIPOC practices (“from the margins,” as it were). On November 17, 2017, I attended a talk by Maggie Nelson at the Art Gallery of Ontario, sponsored by the Canadian Art Foundation. Nelson was in conversation with Sheila Heti. The focus of the talk was *The Argonauts*, although Heti admitted near the beginning of the talk that prior to that week she hadn't actually read Nelson's work before. She had heard through the grapevine that Nelson was writing a book on motherhood, which made Heti nervous because she too was working on a book on motherhood. When

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she had this occasion to read Nelson's book—required of her, of course, for this paid talk—she read, I imagine, with an eye to her own book, conceding her relief to see that she and Nelson were approaching the question of motherhood differently enough and so, it followed, Heti was safe to continue her own project for a commercial market predicated, even in feminist spaces, on certain forms of competitiveness and “who got there first” (Heti's *Motherhood* would be published the following year).<sup>67</sup>

Copies of Nelson's book were available for purchase at the back of the room, although my sense from a glance around the space was that all three hundred or so of us had read the book at least once, and likely had it nestled on our bookshelves next to other feminist and queer theory books. The talk began, and Heti asked Nelson some open-ended questions. As I listened to Nelson speaking, I thought to myself: *This is what a philosopher sounds like. This is the work that a philosopher does.* She spoke with a deep intelligence and what I can only describe as a level-headedness toward subjects of politics, ethics, and aesthetics that I actually (again, in spite of myself) found surprising in such a feminist lecture. Rhetorically, Nelson was focused on philosophical modes of thinking, approaching her answers to questions and prompts as a philosopher would—from an intelligent place of not knowing. She wasn't reciting predictable intersectional feminist talking points, even though she was engaging with feminist problems in a manner that, in my view, could be more effective for bringing social change (by changing how people, including those from diverse backgrounds, view social issues). I wouldn't encounter that experience again until American poet and essayist Anne Boyer's keynote at the *AUTO*-conference at the Royal College of Art in London, in the spring of 2019, when Boyer interwove thoughts on Goethe and the demonic, repetition as insistence, and how trauma is a question of class. Boyer's words had all of us postgraduate feminist writers and artists effervescent, excited to keep on doing the work of theorizing, the work of auto-engaged critical thought, and intersectional living—and the creation, it seemed around me, of yet another theorist fan subculture, one with my kind of taste: the Boyer Babes. (*I love her*, the various women and nonbinary friends I met in London exclaimed, after the talk. *She is brilliant!*)

After about an hour of conversation between Nelson and Heti, they opened up the room to questions. A docent walked around the space,

passing a microphone to those who wanted to speak. First my friend Margeaux Feldman, a local feminist writer and activist, asked a question about who has access to writing autotheoretically; she drew from her own position as a PhD candidate to contextualize her question. Another woman opened up about her experience having recently given birth, asking Nelson—or perhaps just sharing, in the hope of reciprocal sharing—how she reconciled the affects involved in watching a child who was once inside you grow up into a human being who exists apart from you. After a few more questions that were well attuned to the vibe of the room, a young woman stood up, her voice shaking, and began to quote a passage from Nelson’s *The Art of Cruelty*. It was a particularly difficult scene, in which Nelson describes the experience of a man (presumably a pedophile, though not labeled as such) who was caught by NBC’s reality television show *To Catch a Predator* in the process of meeting up with a minor. “When they showed up to the man’s house,” the woman went on to say, “he shot himself in the head.” The room got a bit colder, and my heart started to beat a little bit faster. She continued to speak with a faltering determination, even as she looked about’ to cry.

“So, I guess what I’m asking is: have recent feminist movements gone too far?” the woman asked (maybe she said, “Have we gone too far?”; I can’t remember). She was alluding to #MeToo and the outing of—and subsequent ‘disposal’ of—men who rape and assault, clearly working to parse questions that were uncomfortable and thorny. The women around me began to turn to each other and whisper, softly scoffing. I could see their faces contorting, ridiculing the woman who was standing there, clearly disapproving of her. I felt as though I was transported back to high-school, surrounded by mean girls. The woman who asked the question had clearly gone against the consensus of the room (wait—the room has a consensus?), against the ideological presuppositions in the hearts of young female and nonbinary graduate students like me, who voraciously consume books like *The Argonauts*, nodding emphatically as we read. In a weird way, I felt refreshed that the woman was plucky enough to ask a question like that: she was going against the talking points of feminist talks like these, not as a troll but as someone who was, I believe, seriously invested in the same feminist politics of social justice, but from a different viewpoint—one that might be more aligned with non-white, anti-colonial conceptions of justice, such as radical frameworks of restorative justice.

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She was, it seemed to me, asking a question at a theory talk that was radically empathic in the truest sense of the word, tied to a very thorny problematic, and most of the people in the room seemed to find that off-putting—something exceeding what was permissible in a space of contemporary feminist thought.

I watched as Nelson responded. Like the woman who posed the question, Nelson did not mention specifics, moving instead into a broader philosophical conversation about how, in her work, she is not particularly interested in *making generalizations*. (This felt like a radical statement, but everyone in the room stayed with her, because they're with Nelson, like fangirls: the "Nelson Girls"; like a future version of Kraus's "Bataille Boys" in *I Love Dick*.) Nelson went to explain how she uses strategies like equivocation in her writing, and that she writes in a way that involves looking at a question from multiple perspectives, shuttling between stances as she theorizes. She is wary of generalizations, adding that she is also very wary, as a queer person, of discourses of perversion. (When Nelson says this, I hear it as an almost radical, whistling statement: this was around the time Louis CK was having his "#MeToo moment," which brought the discourse of perversion into the mainstream, and to defend against the use of such language from a woke, queer feminist perspective complicates the politics of Louis CK and his actions, at least if we separate out the obviously key factor of consent. Whether this occurred to others in the room, I do not know.) I wondered how Nelson would be able to create a space for a different kind of feminist conversation around violence and sex, one both philosophical (in its unknowing, liminality, grayness) and political, even galvanizing. For Nelson the autotheorist, thinking through feminist problematics is something best done philosophically—expanding out beyond universalizing statements and binary oppositions to a less predetermined, and possibly reparative, way of thinking and being. The woman who asked the question thanked Nelson before sitting down again.

The day after the talk, an artist friend of mine, who is in the same feminist art communities and social spheres as I, wrote a post on Facebook. It began:

A big hearty 'Fuck you!' to the lady at the Maggie Nelson talk who seriously asked 'what about the rapists?', I'm paraphrasing but you get the idea. My most sincere

condolences to anyone who has to spend time in the company of someone with so much internalized misogyny.

On the one hand, I could see where my friend was coming from. Perhaps they were a survivor, like me, and writing from a place of anger that precludes the kind of sheer empathy or desire-for-understanding-the-other that catalyzed the woman at the talk to ask her unpopular question. On the other hand, I was reminded of how effective social media platforms are at decontextualizing material that really requires context for proper, productive understanding. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for me to comment on the post with a counterperspective without being discursively and socially obliterated and hailed as a rape apologist (even though I am a woman and queer survivor of rape, with a long history of working in frontline feminist activism to support other rape and sexual violence survivors; none of that would matter, in the decontextualizing space of the Facebook post's comment section, where I could be seen as but a "dissenting" voice, maybe even a troll). But I was at the talk too, and that's not how I remember the events relayed in the post at all. The woman asking the question referenced Nelson's *The Art of Cruelty*, a feminist art historiography that carefully deconstructs the twentieth-century avant-garde's often uncritical devotion to transgression, violence, cruelty, and extremism—as found in self-violent, ultra-self-serious performance art, for example—taking issue with the premise that this kind of work has the cathartic or redemptive power “to restore us, or deliver us anew, to an unalienated, unmediated flow of existence characterized by a more authentic relation to the so-called real.”<sup>68</sup> This was important context for the woman's question, which was not “What about the rapists?” so much as “What are the limitations of empathy and reparation in feminist spaces, particularly when it comes to rape and other forms of sexual violence that are beyond the pale?”

“Critics have limits,” as Jennifer Doyle writes in *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (2013), and it seemed as though rape was, in fact, the limit point for many at the talk.<sup>69</sup> It occurred to me, as I reflected on my friend's post, that a topic like this was so charged as to be virtually unintelligible. When it comes to questions of rape, maybe we hadn't yet gotten to a place where we *could* approach it “philosophically,” if

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philosophically means “with a critical distance”—although, as this book shows, this is not its only possible (or even usual) meaning. Maybe, for many of the survivors in that room, the only thing permissible to say is “fuck rapists” and “believe women,” echoing the predetermined memes and hashtags that we circulate as an act of politics—the meme as unquestioned and woke coping mechanism rather than something discursive or theoretical and therefore up for debate. But what if another survivor’s healing practice, and I include myself here, means moving beyond the pain to ask the more difficult questions? Yes, obviously, rapists are bad, and they deserve to face consequences for their actions. This should go without question, and I know that the fact that it does *not* go without question is what is driving my friend and others to experience the level of anger and dismay they do when the topic comes up. And yet rapists, like sociopaths and pedophiles, are also flesh-and-blood people, and anyone seriously invested in questions of ethics will ask what we do with these limit-point cases of violence. What do “we,” societally or as communities, do about this? What do “we,” as feminists, do about this? These are questions that theorists like Nelson, as evidenced in *The Art of Cruelty*, are invested in asking—and who better to take up this question than feminist philosophers and theorists, in communion with their communities?

As I write this anecdote, I feel conflicted, a twisted feeling in my gut. I don’t want to “call out” my friend for their post. I feel for them, and I understand their anger. I have felt it too. I still feel it. The Nelson talk was the same week of the Brett Kavanaugh hearings, which only contributed to the sense of urgency and awareness that rape was horrific, and that more often than not, rapists go without adequate, if any, punishment or accountability. What I want to do is to consider the ways that postinternet culture complicates practices of philosophizing *as historically understood*—maybe, for some of the feminists in that room, a practice of theory and criticism is not about radical empathy or diving headfirst into the epistemological and ontological unknown. Maybe theory is not about the limit-points of ethics. I do not have all the answers. But I continue to return to this anecdote, in the context of a consideration of autotheory as a feminist mode, because it raises the question of what feminist spaces for criticism—like a feminist theorist’s talk and the post-talk Q&A, in a room of sympathetic audience members with presumably similar political allegiances



(*like, we're all on the same side*)—are for, and what kinds of questions and conversations are permissible or welcomed there. There is a difference between the woman who raises the question of how to deal with rapists and the rapists themselves—and this is a point that is worthwhile taking seriously, as feminist theorists and artists and critics taking part in public conversations around difficult and charged topics.

Two years later I was in London, presenting at the Royal College of Art as part of their *AUTO*-conference, a two-day gathering of writers, artists, curators, and critics engaged in practices that exist in proximity to two increasingly popular, nebulous terms: autotheory and autofiction. Anne Boyer was the keynote speaker, and we talked over lunch about the distinction between GenX'rs—“anti-ethical” in terms of what was considered cool and countercultural—and millennials—seemingly obsessed with being ethical, a performance underscored by terms like “virtue signaling.” I shared the anecdote about the Nelson talk and my friend's online response to it with Boyer over lunch. Some other professors were discussing how millennials are too scared to ask questions in class because of cancel culture: “They're terrified to say the wrong thing, because if they say the wrong thing then maybe they'll be destroyed for that.” They discussed among themselves for a bit, and then Boyer pushed back. “We are not born ethical beings. We become ethical, through learning and asking questions. If we're not asking these questions in the classroom, then where are we thinking about these things?” Along with the classroom, I would add other spaces dedicated to philosophy and theory, to thinking-together.

If we cannot take up these questions in a philosophical space like a Maggie Nelson talk at the AGO, in a room of presumably like-minded people (or at the very least similarly oriented with regard to key political question), then where can we take up these questions? And if we cannot consider these questions anywhere or at any time, then what happens to these questions-needing-answers? Do they fester? (I'm certain that everyone in that room at the AGO held intersectional feminist ideals, at least in theory [*this refrain: at least in theory, at least in theory*]). Surely this was a safe space for discussions—or at least a “safer space.” The very women who ridiculed the interlocutor for asking the question were probably the same ones who would describe that space as a safe space, and who would demand that their own needs be met in it. But, as is so often the case, in

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my experience of feminist-described spaces, one person's boundary can be another person's trigger. One person's need can be another person's limit-point. Where does that leave us, as a feminist community? Maybe those who are survivors do not have enough distance to begin to theorize questions about the ontology of violence or whether disclosure can "go too far," and maybe this is OK. But these are questions we need to be asking.

As a survivor of sexual violence and sexual assault myself, and as someone diagnosed with related mental health issues, including C-PTSD, I do not pose these questions naïvely or out of some kind of internalized misogyny. While I sometimes lapse into glibness—perhaps my own defense mechanism—I ask these questions from a desire to continually seek knowledge and understanding in those places that are the most thorny and liminal and urgent *and personal*, and to think about autotheoretical practices as ways of transforming how we think and speak about ethical issues, in addition to aesthetic and political ones. This, it seems to me, is what autotheory as a contemporary mode of practice is well positioned to do. Maybe then the social structures and institutions that we move through—that we think in, and cry in, and laugh in, and feel frustrated in, and feel horny in, and feel misunderstood in—might be transformed. Why were we attending Nelson's talk, if not to take up questions like that together? Were people attending solely to have their own presuppositions and viewpoints affirmed? Was theory just another vacuum? Was contemporary art just another vacuum too?

Theory, and especially autotheory, I think, has the capacity and, in fact, the *responsibility* to do something else—to approach things differently—and autotheory makes space for the exchange between lived, personal, subjective experience and contextualized consideration, critical reflection. Might a feminist practice of autotheory after Sedgwick's "reparative reading" be radically reparative and empathetic to "the other"—even the furthest, most alienating "others" to present-day, intersectional feminism? And if so, are there limits to that empathy? I continue to engage this issue in chapter 5, when I discuss the feminist politics of disclosure and exposure at more length. First, though, in the chapter that follows, I consider citational practices in autotheory across different forms—visual art, installation, mixed media, and video—and the kinds of intertextual and inter-subjective intimacies and communities engendered through these works.