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From Philosopher's Wife to Feminist Autotheorist: Performing Phallic Mimesis as Parody in Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick*

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I just knew in a quiet way I was ruined.
If I agreed to be female.

Eileen Myles
***Foreword to Chris Kraus's* I Love Dick**

Chris kraus's *I Love Dick* (1997) is a polarizing, genre-blurring book of contemporary feminist literature that continues to perplex and thrill readers with its weird modes of articulation. Brassily sharp yet self-consciously complicit in her critiques of theory and the art world, the protagonist Chris Kraus is a barely-fictionalized version of the author who writes through the end of her marriage to her then-husband Sylvère Lotringer—the French-American cultural critic and founding editor of Semiotext(e) press. The plot of *I Love Dick* centres around Kraus's obsession with a man named Dick, a British writer and theorist whom she meets in the opening pages through Lotringer, but the book is not so much driven by plot as it is by political and discursive issues related to contemporary theory, art, writing, and feminism. Over the course of the book, Kraus pens self-reflexive letters to Dick (who she names her "ideal reader" [*Dick* 130]) about her coming-of-age as a woman and aspiring artist in an academic art scene

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where her husband thrives, interpellating Dick as a phallic cipher for all her desires and frustrations.

The resurgence of interest in *I Love Dick* over the last five years is due in part to its prescient moves around public shame and blame that resonate with present-day feminist movements like #TimesUp and #MeToo. Kraus's *I Love Dick* shares with fourth-wave feminists the strategy of disclosure, or the "outing" of bad behaviour of known, named men as a means of resisting sexual harassment and rape culture. A large part of Kraus's critical practice is taking issue with specific theorists and their lived actions, drawing attention to contradictions and hypocrisies between rhetoric and practice. Whether it is French poststructuralist men like Guattari excluding women from their anthologies of theory (*Dick* 227) or whether it is a revered professor and academic behaving in sexually inappropriate ways with students, Kraus does not hesitate to call specific people out. In the case of the latter, it is Richard Schechner, the founder and theorist of the discipline now known as Performance Studies, who Kraus "outs" for sexual misconduct with female students (173).

In 2016, just one year after American writer Maggie Nelson's similarly genre-defying *The Argonauts* popularized the term "autotheory"[1] as a form of critical memoir, writer and director Jill Soloway extended *I Love Dick*'s reach to Hollywood with her on-screen adaptation of Kraus's book as an *Amazon* series in which Kathryn Hahn played Kraus and Kevin Bacon played the titular "Dick." The one-season show was shot on location in Marfa, Texas—the home of Soloway's then-partner, poet Eileen Myles, whose 1991 *Not Me* was published by Kraus through Semiotext(e) sub-press Native Agents. Such entwined relations mirror the reflexively incestuous ties that constitute a certain scene of alternative American theory, literature, and criticism embodied by Semiotext(e)—a point Kraus astutely hones in on with *I Love Dick*—her first major published work. Working comedically, Kraus uses the strategic tactic of mimesis to subvert the unchecked gendered biases undergirding continental philosophy, French poststructuralism, and American literature.

In this article, I read Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* as a particularly clear example of the autotheoretical impulse in contemporary feminist practices. I consider how Kraus performatively engages with the male-authored traditions of theory from the perspective of a critically adept, postpunk, Jewish feminist living in America near the end of the twentieth century. Kraus's use of mimesis, as an iterative, transformative moment that takes

1 Nelson borrowed from Paul B. Preciado's 2008 *Testo Yonqui (Testo Junkie)*.

place over the course of her autotheoretical cult classic *I Love Dick*, is deeply resonant with Luce Irigaray's thesis on mimesis that she espouses in relation to the role of the philosopher's wife (*This Sex Which is Not One* 151).

Through close readings of key passages, I consider Kraus's comedic representation of her role as "Academic Wife," extending Luce Irigaray's configuration of the "philosopher's wife" as articulated in *This Sex Which Is Not One* to better understand the strategic performance Kraus is engaging over the course of *I Love Dick*. Kraus strategically enacts the role of "philosopher's wife," a role that Irigaray theorizes in relation to the mimetic function. Drawing on Irigaray's mimetic function and considering it alongside Butler's notion of gender performativity ("Performative" 519), I posit that Kraus moves from "reproductive mimesis" to "productive mimesis" using the historically-overdetermined role of the "philosopher's wife" (Irigaray, *This Sex* 76, 131). The framework of Irigarayan mimesis provides context, within a history of feminist philosophy on power and discourse, for understanding Kraus's transformative inhabiting of the role of "Academic Wife" in her book (Kraus, *Dick* 145).

I draw on historical comedy theory by philosophers and cultural critics Henri Bergson and Northrop Frye as well as contemporary feminist comedy theory by scholars like Joanne Gilbert and Regina Barreca to understand the comedic workings within *I Love Dick* and to provide insight into the ways that Kraus's book—decisively postmodern in its experimentations—engages both classic and feminist approaches to comedy. When it comes to my rhetorical approach in this article, it is worth noting that, while contemporary theorizations of feminism complicate, or even make untenable, such overly determined binary oppositions as "male" and "female," I return to these as provisional points of reference in my discussion of Kraus's work: this mirrors the cheeky mimicry of Kraus's own performative invocations of a male/female opposition—a symbolic gender binary that undergirds the heterosexual situations of *I Love Dick*.

Mimesis as strategic performance

> And hysterical miming will be the little girl's or the woman's effort to save her sexuality from total repression and destruction.
>
> ***Luce Irigaray***
> ***Speculum of the Other Woman***

In the autotheoretical world constructed by Kraus, she features, as the protagonist alongside Lotringer and Dick, a character who remains without a surname but who, after a series of events following the book's publication, was revealed to be Dick Hebdige, the author of *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979).[2] After their initial meeting, Kraus begins to pen letters to Dick, which become an integral part of the text's intertextual form. While Lotringer briefly joins in on the letter writing as a vaguely kinky, somewhat unsettling (due to Dick's lack of consent) conceptual game, Kraus's fixation on Dick culminates in the end of her marriage to Lotringer—and the end of part 1 of the book. Kraus moves between genres like the epistolary, autofiction, and art criticism. As Kraus struggles through heterosexual desires for romance and sex, she also struggles through the capacity to be understood through language and articulation.

Writing in France in the 1970s, Irigaray describes continental philosophy as the "master discourse" through which women must pass if they wish to inhabit and transform language in a phallocentric system (*This Sex* 149). When it comes to participating in language or discourse, Irigaray summarizes the options that are available to her: she can either speak as a man (or "neuter"— without "sex difference") and be intelligible, or she can speak as a female and remain unintelligible (76). Irigaray states that in order for her to "speak intelligently" (and intelligibly) as a woman and to take part in philosophical discourse as a being whose body is gendered and inscribed as explicitly female or feminine, she must enter into the Lacanian discursive mechanism of subject-formation through a method she terms "mimesis": "An interim strategy for dealing with the realm of discourse (where the speaking subject is posited as masculine), in which the woman deliberately assumes the feminine style and posture assigned to her within this discourse in order to uncover the mechanisms by which it exploits her" (220). According to Irigaray's theory of mimesis, a woman enters into discourse through reproductive mimesis and can then subvert it through productive mimesis.[3] Mimesis is a provisional performance in discourse, wherein a woman takes on the role and characteristics of the

2 Hebdige's "initiation of legal action" (Zembla) against Kraus in 1997 is one event that points to the fidelity between what Kraus half-heartedly frames as fictionalized and what happened in real life, and it also brought about the widespread association of his name with Kraus's book.

3 Irigaray outlines two kinds of mimesis, reproductive and productive, which are found in Plato's *Symposium* and which she elaborates in the context of her feminist critique of philosophy. Irigaray defines mimesis as a strategic performance in which woman enters into discourse through reproductive mimesis and then has the opportunity to subvert it through productive mimesis; the mimetic func-

conventionally "feminine" in order to transform that role from within. Given that philosophy (or theory) functions as a "master discourse … the one that lays down the law to the others," Irigaray seeks to change the laws of philosophy rather than attend to its symptoms (*This Sex* 149)—she wants to stage a feminist transformation of philosophical discourse. And yet, Irigaray notes that this is not possible—that the "master discourse" of philosophy must be taken on through the tactical use of indirection: "the option left to me was *to have a fling with the philosophers,* which is easier said than done," Irigaray explains (150). One of the best ways to have this proverbial fling is to become the philosopher's wife, a role which, is primed, according to Irigaray, for productive mimicry (151). For Irigaray, mimicry is a tactical, initial move, which Kraus engages accordingly over the course of part 1.

One of the best ways to have this proverbial fling is to become the philosopher's wife.

For Irigaray, as for Kraus, mimicry depends upon the politics of narcissism which is a problematic in the fields of theory and scholarly writing as well as in literary and art history. Given the turn to the "auto" or self, autotheoretical works are entangled in a long history of the feminist politics of "narcissism." To be sure, the tension between the orientation toward the self ("auto") and the production of legitimate theoretical work ("theory") is bound up in this term "autotheory" and presents a problem that is particularly fraught in light of the history of feminism. Luce Irigaray has written extensively on narcissism in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, proffering her own feminist response to what she perceives to be the gross phallocentrism of Western philosophy. In contrast to Freud, who describes women as fundamentally narcissistic,[4] Irigaray rigorously describes the male philosopher as narcissistic—a narcissism,

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tion is a means rather than an end (where cultural revolution and the creation of new worlds might be an end), and it is constrained by parameters of time (*This Sex* 149). Irigaray's way of describing the transformative shift from reproductive to productive mimesis—where metaphors of performance abound—resembles Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and the corresponding notions of citationality and iteration, which Butler extends from Jacques Derrida (Butler, "Performative" 519).

4 Luce Irigaray has made a convincing case that there remains an unresolved paradox in Sigmund Freud's writings on narcissism and women. In Freudian psychoanalytic thought, women are associated with narcissism by virtue of their femininity and simultaneously distanced from the very possibility of being narcissistic due to them not having access to their own subjectivity via discourse in the Lacanian sense. In "An Ex-orbitant Narcissism," Irigaray observes the passivity and lack that Freud grants to women, arguing that women are not given the freedom to actually be narcissistic in the phallocentric system in which we operate; she points to Freud's theory of penis envy to drive her point

Irigaray notes, enabled through the male philosopher's presumably female wife. According to Irigaray, the philosopher's wife functions as an object for the philosopher—a reflective surface ("mirror") and formless matter ("reproductive material") that exists to serve the philosopher's ego-driven ends (151). Making a larger case for the fundamental phallic narcissism bolstering the Western philosophical project, Irigaray calls out the elided specificity of male philosophers that masquerades as universality. She acknowledges that women have had a role in the production of philosophy, not so much as philosophers but as source material appropriated by the male philosopher for his own ends—as the body (matter/mater) which "nourishes speculation" (*This Sex* 151). According to Irigaray, the narcissism of the philosopher is dependent upon his wife withholding what she knows about him.

Historically, for a woman to dutifully fulfil the role of the "philosopher's wife," she must keep her husband's secrets. In addition, the role of the philosopher's wife necessitates an "avoidance of self-expression" (151): so, the wife's avoiding of disclosure on behalf of her husband goes hand in hand with her avoiding self-reflection and self-expression. Theorizing Irigaray through frameworks of phenomenology, Virpi Lehtinen points out how this mirroring function imposed on the philosopher's wife would be troubled if the philosopher himself were to become more self-aware (172). Indeed, in order for reproductive mimesis to give way to the subversive capacities of productive mimesis, the philosopher's wife must engage in "[a] transformation toward self-definition" (172). Now, instead of continuing to avoid self-knowledge, the woman moves toward self-reflection and, in doing so, reaches that transformative state of reproductive mimesis or reiteration (think of Derrida, where out of repetition comes the possibility of difference). Through an experimental writing practice grounded in self-reflexivity, comedy, and postconfessional disclosure, Kraus mimetically takes on the part of "philosopher's wife" and, by the end of the text, deconstructs it to find a new role to call her own: that of the feminist autotheorist.

Autotheory often involves approaching one's lived experiences as material through which to theorize the political ramifications of one's experi-

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home (*Speculum* 68). Irigaray makes clear that, while Freud might claim narcissism as a feminine perversion, narcissism is in fact phallic in the context of our phallocentric economy of subjectivity and signification (18): it is the male philosopher who is narcissistic, Irigaray states (*This Sex* 151), but this narcissism is not pathologized by Freud so much as upheld as it implicitly undergirds the production of philosophy.

ences but also to bring to life the theory explored, and Kraus engages this mode for the duration of the text. Within the contexts of *I Love Dick* and of Kraus's own life at the time of writing (1993 and 1994), Lotringer and Dick metonymically stand in for the "master discourse" of theory in its late-twentieth-century manifestation—namely, 1970s French post-structuralism in America. In 1974, Lotringer founded Semiotext(e) as "a vehicle for introducing French theory into the United States" (Schwarz 206). While Lotringer had been hired to teach structuralism at Columbia, he was more passionate about the possibility of "engineering a nonacademic intellectual movement" and "reinvent(ing) the concept of revolution in America" through the explicitly politicized theory of post-1968 France (207). Semiotext(e) became a space for "the interface between the globally dominant American culture industry and the French theorization of the post-1968 experience" (209), primarily publishing theory written by European and American men.

With a few exceptions, including Kathy Acker (with whom Lotringer had been involved) Semiotext(e) did not publish much work by women. This began to change when Lotringer began his relationship with Kraus. In their 1994 interview with the couple, Henry Schwarz and Anne Balsamo describe it somewhat euphemistically: "In the late 1980s, when Lotringer began associating with NY-based filmmaker Chris Kraus, he became aware of the severe imbalances of women's representation within both the journal and the Foreign Agents series" (212). It is difficult to ignore this point that the only women Lotringer was publishing in Semiotext(e), with some exceptions, were the two he was romantically involved with: from the Irigarayan view of feminist discursive possibility, this also provides evidence for Irigaray's thesis of the mimetic function—that women can only access phallocentric language and discourse through mimetic roles, such as by "having *a fling,*" quite literally, with a philosopher (*This Sex* 150).

With the dawn of Kraus's sub-press Semiotext(e) Native Agents in the early 1990s, theoretically-informed, autobiographical writings by women began to be published by the press; yet this work was framed less as theory and more as autofiction. During the interview, Lotringer denounces feminist theory for its perceived psychoanalytic leanings (212), a position rationalized through his alignment with Deleuze and Guattari (and their *Anti-Oedipus* thrust). And yet, by denouncing all feminist theory in this way, Lotringer as Semiotext(e) editor is complicit in re-entrenching contemporary, post-1960s theory as the phallic "master discourse" that is inhospitable to the concerns of feminism (Irigaray, *This Sex* 149). What Kraus makes clear in *I Love Dick* is the way in which even those subversive

movements in contemporary theory (embodied by Semiotext(e)) exclude and suppress female and non-cis-male artists and writers who are working in experimental and critically rigorous ways and whose work continues to be misunderstood and devalued in the discursively elevated space of theory, relegated to the realm of "fiction" instead. The stakes of theory, and the terms of the theoretical conversations one enters when they take on the role of a theorist, seem too high—especially the "high theory" (Di Leo 1998) of 1970s French poststructuralism, which was the purview of men.

I Love Dick opens with "Scenes From a Marriage," a kind of film script synopsis in which Kraus introduces herself, Lotringer, and the titular Dick as characters who fulfil particular predetermined roles. Setting the scene of a dinner party, Kraus establishes a discursive and sexually-charged conflict between the men who are well-versed in "postmodern critical theory" and the woman Chris "who is no intellectual" (*Dick* 19). While the men in this scene occupy the realm of the mind, freely engaging in intellectual discourse with each other, Kraus occupies the realm of the body, subject to the male gaze that feminist film theorists have, by the time of Kraus's writing, theorized to the point of exhaustion. In this scene, the men are to criticality what the woman is to carnality. Riffing on this binary, while at the same time evading the predictable feminist script, Kraus writes of how Chris "notices Dick making continual eye contact with her" and that this attention from Dick "makes her feel powerful":

> Over dinner the two men discuss recent trends in postmodern critical theory and Chris, who is no intellectual, notices Dick making continual eye contact with her. Dick's attention makes her feel powerful, and when the check comes she takes out her Diners Club card. "Please," she says. "Let me pay." (19)

Kraus combines feminist attributes—paying for the bill—with stereotypically feminine ones: that her power, in this scene, comes not from her active participation in the literal and discursive economies between men but from her receiving "Dick's attention" through the form of "continual eye contact" (19). In doing so, she sets the tone for the kinds of ironic, mimetic feminist jokes that ensue. When we understand what Kraus is doing in *I Love Dick* as a series of strategically mimetic acts, the power of the joke—at least for a feminist readership—is underlined. Although excluded from the Symbolic Order of theoretical language and suppressed as a speaking subject as a result of her gender, Kraus nevertheless feels "powerful" because she receives Dick's attention; within the conceit of this joke, the power Kraus experiences from being objectified overrides the

power of her desire to be an intellectual. From the outset, she "assumes the feminine style and posture assigned to her within this discourse" (Irigaray, *This Sex* 220) and, in this way, sets the stage for her performance of reproductive mimesis. Kraus foregrounds the illusion of the free and equal woman in a post women's lib society by focusing on her agency as an object of phallic desire and a willing, capitalistic consumer with the material agency to pay for dinner; notably, *I Love Dick* predates (by one year) *Sex and the City* with its iconic feminist anti-heroes and its ensuing brand of neoliberal feminist empowerment and (white) women-centred consumer culture.[5]

Writing as a self-identified "failed filmmaker" (Kraus, *Dick* 81), Kraus transmutes the material of her life into cinematic anecdotes—another mimetic layer in *I Love Dick*. She frames the scene of a dinner party as a darkly comic melodrama where the men represent the elevated discourse of "theory" and women represent something "other"—that which is "unarticulated" (*Dick* 21). "Because she does not express herself in theoretical language," Kraus writes of the character Chris, "no one expects too much from her and she is used to tripping out on layers of complexity in total silence" (21). In this faintly fictionalized world constituted by Kraus, it is not that women are incapable of abstract theoretical thought—as she states here, the character is "tripping out on layers of complexity" (21) in private—but that they have not yet found a language through which to publicly articulate themselves in a way that will be understood by the men. Here, we return to the initial dilemma Irigaray perceived in the 1970s, where she critiqued the phallocentrism of philosophy and suggested the approach of strategic mimesis while other French feminists, like Hélène Cixous, sought a specifically feminine mode of writing that existed somewhere outside the bounds of phallocentric discourse ("Laugh" 875).

Kraus establishes a mechanical[6] arrangement in *I Love Dick* that is prompted by patriarchal terms, where the man stands as the speaking intellectual while the woman remains a silent body. The real-life characters become stereotypes, players in the "game" of contemporary theory and its discursive terms. Kraus stages the gendered tensions in the history of theory in her exchange with her husband and Dick, two men who are both cultural theorists and expats (French and British respectively) employed by

5 I take this idea from Amelia Jones's reading of feminist body art as an instantiating of the female artist as simultaneously subject and object (*Body Art*).

6 Henri Bergson defines the comic situation as "Any arrangement of acts and events … which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement" (105).

American universities and valued for their postpunk, European approaches to understanding American culture. The work of both crosses between academic and art discourses and spheres and is indebted to poststructuralist and postmodern theory. In part 2, Chris acknowledges that she was "playing" the role of "Academic Wife" and she tells Dick as much (*Dick* 145). In doing so, Kraus's underscores the way social scripts are performances and performative: the act of iterating something opens up space for the capacity to reproduce the role differently.

The act of iterating something opens up space for the capacity to reproduce the role differently.

Referring to herself as an "academic groupie" and using the materials of her body and her life, Kraus employs self-degradation to emphasize the power dynamics at play between heterosexual women and the men whose work they perceive as culturally significant. As a character in this metonymically gendered exchange, Chris embodies the stereotypes of the woman as "Academic Wife," who remains quiet but not dumb ("tripping out on layers of complexity in total silence" [21]) and, presumably, physically desirable, even as Kraus resists the latter in her descriptions of herself as an "Ugly Girl" (181). That there is a holdover from less progressive historical epochs by which men are encouraged to speaks and be strong and women to be demure and quiet, even within a context of progressive, leftist, "queer," and experimental theorizing, enhances the dark and poignant comedy of Kraus's observations—especially for feminist-minded readers. In terms of gendered power dynamics, the fact that Kraus opens with such a seemingly simplistic scene[7]—especially in a supposedly postfeminist[8] age—is part of the comedic point: the comic function revels in this kind of hyperbolic simplification.

Tactical indirection: subverting the master discourse

Using irony and other comedic and parodic strategies, Kraus stages the gendered "drama" of contemporary theory as a melodramatic comedy in *I Love Dick*. In the book's title, Kraus performatively constitutes a space of reverence for the phallus, and this phallic devotion is one way in which Kraus's performative positioning in the text is mimetic. Instead of disavowing the phallic outright as a semantic and social imperative, as Irigaray and Wittig and some other feminists might seek to do, Kraus makes known her desire for "Dick"—the genital-sexual (slang), the symbolic (phallus),

7 Kraus could be seen as playing with the metaphor of the last supper, where herself, Lotringer, and Dick invert the sanctified trinity.

8 In the late 1990s, when Kraus was writing this book, the discourse of "postfeminism" circulated with a certain ease—both in popular culture and within certain academic spheres.

and the particular (male theorist). In the metatheoretical realm that Kraus creates with *I Love Dick,* it is the contemporary theorist who stands as the phallic arbiter of knowledge and authority: the big "Dick," so to speak. In terms of what is appropriate for women, for Kraus to say she loves Dick places her in a sexually aggressive position: she becomes the one who pursues the man, ravenous for "Dick" and dick. Such a public act of disclosure, through the framing mechanism of her book's title, risks opening her up to the ensuing sexual objectification and, one can imagine, murky social abjection that a woman experiences when she is seen as too sexually available in the hetero landscape.

At the same time, this reverence will just as soon become a site for satire and inversion. *I Love Dick* reverses the genders of the comedic structure that Northrop Frye outlines in his structuralist description of comedy, and the structuring of the action around romantic desire is a conceit within which more complex theoretical, artistic, and discursive feminist desires are couched to ironic effect. Feminist readers might recognize that "the obstructing characters" who "are in charge of the play's society"—Lotringer and Dick—are "usurpers" (Frye 163–64), and that the new society that manifests at the end of the text is closer to a feminist one. While there is a feminist politics at work in *I Love Dick* (most transparently in the essays constituting part 2) there is also an ambivalence characteristic of Kraus's writing and feminist comedy more generally. Instead of the protagonist of the comedy being a young man who desires a young woman, as it is in Frye's account (163), we have a woman nearing middle age who desires an older man. What's more, Chris Kraus's name is ambiguously gendered, and her descriptions of herself point to the ways in which she fails at being properly "female": she is a self-described "de-gendered freak" who has been accused of "acting like a boy" in the past (*Dick* 173). Performing a kind of queer gender failure,[9] Kraus's becoming-boy recalls performance precursors from history, such as the trope in Shakespearean plays where the girl "brings about the comic resolution by disguising herself as a boy" (Frye 183). Kraus's desire to find a voice through the autotheoretical letters she writes to Dick is resisted by the opposition of two patriarchs: most vehemently Dick and, to some extent, Chris's older husband Sylvère. Frye notes that "The opponent to the hero's wishes, when not the father, is generally someone who partakes of the father's closer relation to established society" (164–65); it is Dick as "cowboy" (201), as theorist, and as tenured

9 Where gender failure describes a state of not fitting into the gender binary—a state named and reclaimed as such by contemporary writers and artists like Ivan E. Coyote and Rae Spoon (Coyote and Spoon 1).

faculty at a California university who partakes of Sylvère's "closer relation to established society" and who rejects Kraus's letters, while Kraus is the unintelligible woman and the abject "kike" (201).

American humour scholar Regina Barreca describes the female comic's use of "comedic 'covert' language" as a strategy that "masks" the comic's "radical contradiction of accepted patriarchal authority" (8) through methods like irony and self-deprecation. It is through her mimetic performance of heterosexual femininity that Kraus makes uses of such a "comedic 'covert' language," masking her radical contradiction of the men in her life—contemporary theorists—with a feigned indulgence of their egos. Kraus shrouds her feminist frustration in a seemingly self-effacing and hyper-feminized obsession with Dick: being scorned by him in the plot of *I Love Dick*, she is "degraded" and, therefore, less threatening. But inhabiting this position of degradation is a performance which allows Kraus to reveal the conditions under which she, as a woman, is always already degraded. In the midst of a discussion of contemporary artists and theorists, Kraus asks, "Why does everybody think women are debasing themselves when we expose the conditions of our own debasement?" (221), echoing the views of earlier feminists, from Mary Wollstonecraft to George Eliot. Debasing herself then is a performance meant to reveal the structural conditions that consistently undermine her.

With the female-coded form of the epistolary genre, and the "Dear Dick" rhetorical conceit coyly mirroring the "Dear Diary" of female adolescence, Kraus performatively usurps Dick for her own mimetic feminist ends. Dick functions as a metonymic stand-in for the residual traces of patriarchal masculinity as it continues to flourish on the margins of the mainstream: Kraus repeatedly interpellates Dick as a the wild, frontier-imperialist figure of the "cowboy" (201) and as a lone wolf figure who is sensitive but stoic. Using deadpan observation and straightforward description of anecdotes from life, Kraus calls attention to what she perceives to be the problematic aspects of "Dick"—both as a specific person and as a more generalized phenomenon amongst men with cultural and social capital in the art and academic worlds. These aspects include Dick's (implied) sexual encounters with women who are much younger than him—such as the woman whom Chris hears on Dick's answering machine and heretofore refers to as the "Bimbo" (22)—and Dick's (implied) appropriation of women's ideas without due credit. Relaying an anecdote from a dinner party, Kraus configures the character Dick as embodying many of the problems that feminist scholars in literature, art, and philosophy take up in their work, including, but not limited to, the politics

of canon-formation: "Betsey remembered something smart you'd said: I don't believe in the evil of banality but I believe in the banality of evil. What's Dick got to do with Hannah Arendt? I wondered … Anyway Dick I like you so much better than these people" (100). Kraus speaks with a knowing irony—"What's Dick got to do with Hannah Arendt?"—pointing out that the "banality of evil" is not the theoretical insight of Dick, as his friends at the party made it seem, but the subtitle (and, in this way, an obvious, uncredited citation) of a 1963 publication by the German-born Jewish American female theorist Arendt. Kraus also implicates Sylvère in her satirical send-up: since Sylvère is a Jewish man whose family fled the Nazis (as did Arendt's), he should know the reference to Arendt. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that he does not, and, in this way, the passage can be read as another instance where Kraus combines anecdotal truth with comedic hyperbole to stage real-life stories as telling feminist allegories. Whether this anecdote actually happened or not, its construction in the text performs Kraus's characteristic adroit awareness of the politics of the personal and her mimetic acts that aim to advance a feminist aesthetics of accountability within learned social circles. This extends certain long-standing feminist aims, such as ensuring women have their rightful place in the canon, by making a joke of even the most learned men's seeming ignorance of key female thinkers.

Kraus employs the rhetorical strategy of couching her feminist jokes and criticisms within direct addresses and self-effacing appeals to her reader Dick; in this way, she affirms his power as her reader and source of validation, while at the same time troubling the foundations on which his reputation stands. We see this in the above instance where Kraus softens her jab at Dick's appropriation of Arendt with a declaration of her affection for him (100)—an affection which, in this rhetorical and symbolic context, seems feigned and strategic. Similarly, in the midst of Chris's insightful and sophisticated treatment of the trope of schizophrenia in twentieth-century theory near the end of part 2, Kraus concludes the section with another self-effacing non sequitur—a cloying appeal to Dick's ego that, when read in the context of *I Love Dick* as a whole, is patronizing: "Oh Dick, I want to be an intellectual like you" (226).

While Kraus's ravenous desire for "Dick" is a motif throughout the book, it is a metaphor for Kraus's unfulfilled desire to be recognized as an intellectual, a privileged position occupied, as she underscores throughout, exclusively by men. When Kraus relays an anecdote of Antonio Negri stating at a party that "Christa Woolf is not an intellectual" (227), for example, she shows who gets to name an intellectual as such, and the politics of such

naming. After reading one of the letters that she wrote to Dick, Lotringer denounces Kraus for writing something that really "makes no sense at all" (65); "You're supposed to be intelligent," Sylvère tells her and so she tries again, writing "The Intelligent Fax (printed on *Gravity and Grace* letterhead)" (65). Kraus's decision to frame her nonsensical words with the "official" letterhead of her failed production company and film—a film which is itself autotheoretical, where Kraus reflects on her process of making the film *Gravity and Grace* alongside an extended reading of the life and work of Simone Weil "the anorexic philosopher" (*Aliens* 162)—furthers the simultaneous self-effacement and autotheoretical affirmation. Kraus goes on to write autotheoretically, critically analyzing her actions as she describes them: "It was an interesting thing, to plummet back into the psychosis of adolescence. Living so intensely in your head that boundaries disappear" (*Dick* 65). Once again, it is not that Kraus as a character in the text is incapable of complex thinking but that she does so in the privacy of her own mind: it is the letters Kraus writes to Dick that become the avenue through which she begins to publicly articulate her views in terms that are both subjective and elevated in their proximity to theory and its many intertextual references—and are also theory's voice of narcissistic ego authority through the self-aware, autotheoretical form that these letters, and the larger book of *I Love Dick,* take.

By packaging her incisive critiques within stereotypically feminine, hyperbolically indulgent performance for her "ideal reader" (*Dick* 130) Dick, Kraus performs the very female-ness that has been grounds for the dismissal of women from the theoretical realm while simultaneously refuting the grounds of that dismissal in her apt pre-empting.[10] That she ultimately appropriates Dick and 'his'[11] phallocentric terms toward her own feminist ends brings the autotheoretical dynamics of *I Love Dick* full circle. In the contentiously titled "Kike Art" chapter, Kraus advances a sophisticated interpretation of Jewish artist R.B. Kitaj's paintings that is grounded in her identification with the artist. After writing a nuanced take

10 In "Why Women Aren't Funny," Christopher Hitchens cites Fran Lebowitz, who says that "humour is largely aggressive and pre-emptive, and what's more male than that?" (Hitchens).

11 Of course, Dick is the larger metonymic stand-in for all of patriarchal culture's phallic biases and tendencies—not so much the literal Dick (Hebdige) himself. He was, as this book shows, simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he became an unwitting participant in, and obsession of, Kraus in this book (both the character Chris Kraus, in the book's plot, and the writer Chris Kraus, in the book's focus).

on the context of the 1960s and the politics of art economies, grounding her theses in an art critical reading of Kitaj's 1964 painting *The Nice Old Man and the Pretty Girl (With Huskies),* Kraus truncates her own argument with statements like "Oh D … I feel so emotional about this writing" and "I'm completely illegitimate" (*Dick* 191). Within the rhetorical and autotheoretical context of her writing, such a statement is unconvincing: when read in the context of what has preceded it, it is clear that Kraus's claims of illegitimacy are put on. She is appealing to the patriarchal context that continues to misunderstand her, while at the same time demonstrating—through a text that is tactically subversive—her force as an emerging feminist voice. Kraus's strategic occupation of the role of academic wife or philosopher's wife, for example, becomes a possibility for her to both generate a "new genre" of autotheory in her own work and make space for related works in postpunk, third-wave feminist writing in the form of her Semiotext(e) Native Agents series. Even as her writings are effectively feminist, Kraus does not protect feminism from her satirizing impulse: in this way, she writes a work of feminist criticism that is as nuanced about itself as it is about patriarchal culture. This is another reason why the book resonates so strongly with a present-day readership of younger women and queers in academia and the art world, who might be invested in the concerns of feminism while skeptical of some manifestations of said feminism.

In *Performing Marginality,* feminist humour theorist Joanne Gilbert suggests that the agency of a female stand-up comedian lies in her capacity to embody the position of fool, artist, or social critic who can perform and, in turn, transform her marginality through iteration—where out repetition comes the possibility of difference. Kraus performs her marginality—as "degraded" and "abject" woman—in winking ways: as a woman, as Jewish ("kike"), and as otherwise abject (her chronic illness, her eating disorders, her past involvement with sex work, her gender failure). Women's comedy has a history of making use of the particular and the embodied rather than the so-called universal: women, queer, and racialized comics like Margaret Cho and Cameron Esposito are not able to transcend their particular bodies and the ways their bodies are coded. Whereas Seinfeld could present the illusion of a universal experience which made him so relatable, they are always already gendered and racialized. This paradigm is replicated in the history of philosophy and theory wherein the white male is the universal objective, concealing his particularity and autos. Working with what one has—including the ways one has been categorized socioculturally—becomes a site for subversion, as female comics and comics

Context, here, is key.

of colour reclaim stereotypes through mimesis.[12] Gilbert describes what she calls "strategic subversion" (20) through humour, using her "That's *stupid bitch,* to you" joke as an example. It is this "strategic subversion"—or balancing between institutionalization and insurrectionist methods—that serve as what Barrecca calls "a thinly veiled indictment of society" (21). Of course, the ingenious convergence of self-deprecation and subversion in "a carefully constructed joke" (21) still runs the risk of misinterpretation: that it is complicit in perpetuating sexist or racist stereotypes by repeating those stereotypes, albeit in a strategically mimetic (in the reproductive mimesis sense) way. Context, here, is key—as much for comedy as for conceptual art and postconceptual literary texts like Kraus's *I Love Dick.*

Chris engages in self-deprecation and does not seem to take herself too seriously within the body of her text—another hyper-feminine, disparaging trope. Indeed, this is another moment of strategic performance: after all, Kraus is self-involved enough to write this book and incorporate herself and her life into its fabric. In contrast to Chris, Dick is portrayed as genuinely ego-driven both in the text and in the real-life. Dick Hebdige's public outing of himself as the eponymous character as outlined in Nic Zembla's article and interview in *New York Magazine* and his seeking out legal action against Kraus (Zembla) underlines that he takes himself, and his rights and integrity, very seriously. Both in the text and in real life, Dick does not "get" Kraus's joke, and his denouncing of her work as being read "only because it exploits a recognizable figure," referring to himself, returns us to the initial problem of the narcissism of male philosophers that in part provoked this entire feminist autotheoretical critique in *I Love Dick*. This establishes Dick as the inflexible or rigid figure in the comedy of Kraus's creation who is not in on the joke: the forces of "tension and elasticity" are central to Bergson's comedy theory, where rigidity is comic (Bergson 74) and inelasticity or inflexibility prompt suspicion (73).

Kraus's strategy of self-deprecation extends to feminism: while her work is effectively feminist, the character Kraus brashly evades the "feminist" label. Further complicating things, Kraus admits "Sylvère-the-pragmatist kept telling me I'd have better luck if I'd just call myself a 'feminist'" (*Aliens* 103), since this way her work would have a context within which it could be understood. The character Chris tells Dick that, while she loves

12 Three methods of comedy that Bergson outlines in "Laughter" are repetition, inversion, and "the equivocal situation" or "the reciprocal interference of a series" (123). Repetition can be a method of comedy, whether this takes the form of an impersonation or impression, repeating one's words to comic (or annoying) effect, or engaging in ironic and self-aware reclaiming of stereotypes.

postmodern theory, she rejects "experimental film world feminism," which we can take to mean feminist film theory of the 1980s, with its emphasis on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and "the gaze":

> What put me off experimental film world feminism, besides all its boring study groups on Jacques Lacan, was its sincere investigation into the dilemma of the Pretty Girl. As an Ugly Girl it didn't matter much to me. And didn't Donna Haraway finally solve this by saying all female lived experience is a bunch of riffs, completely fake, so we should recognize ourselves as Cyborgs? (*Dick* 181)

Despite her history as a filmmaker, Kraus does not identify with this branch of feminist theory. In fact, it is among the first renunciations she makes as she willingly accepts Dick's gaze in the opening scene. By self-identifying as an "Ugly Girl," Kraus assumes an outsider position in relation both to heterosexual men and to feminist film theory. Kraus's rejection of certain movements in feminism resembles the critiques of feminism advanced by artists like Wilke—with her "Beware of Fascist Feminism" statement on a 1977 poster featuring her self-image ("Marxism"). Irigaray's mimesis is an example of approaching the master discourse in an oblique way in order to deconstruct it. Similarly, Kraus distances herself from the feminist label to avoid potential resistance it may evoke. In this way she can advance her feminist agenda in less obvious, but no less effective ways.

Comedy too can act as a buffer—a way of obliquely advancing an agenda. Gilbert describes comedy as "a socially acceptable form of aggression" and the joke as "an act of aggression and self-protection all in one" (10–11). In her autotheoretical and comedic work, Kraus calls into question the entire culture of male-authored theory, literature, and art in the post-1960s American context, calling out the hypocrisies in its persistent sexism and its denigration of "the personal." That she does not go about this in a straightforwardly aggressive way, but instead transmutes her critiques through strategically mimetic tactics, including hyperfeminized self-deprecation, allows her to avoid potential instances of defensive retaliation. "Perhaps women and minorities must *seem* non-threatening, as fools did in order to become licensed social critics," Gilbert writes, reflecting on the transformative history of feminist comedy (21). In order to "*seem* non-threatening," Kraus's masculinist aggression is couched in a hyperbolically feminine (self-effacing, self-degrading) voice. Ultimately, this can be doubly wounding, as in her patronizing of Dick through her disingenuous appeals to his ego.

The move from phallocentrism to feminism

In the conceptual world of *I Love Dick*, Kraus's continued performing of the positionings of "amateur" (176) and "not an intellectual" (227) stands as a mimetic strategy for how women might subvert the systems and frameworks that exclude and suppress them without being seen as too threatening to the men. When Kraus announces her decision to leave Sylvère, it signals her move to find her own voice apart from the patriarchal institutions that she has until then been dependent—or, on which, as Anna Watkins Fisher puts it, she has been "parasitic" (223): "'Nothing is irrevocable,' Sylvère said. 'No,' she screamed, 'you're wrong!' By this time she was crying. 'History isn't dialectical, it's essential! Some things will never go away!' And the next day, Monday, January 30, she left him" (*Dick* 117). This scene demonstrates how autotheory as a feminist practice brings the irrational—a woman in hysterics, "crying" and "screaming"—into proximity with the theoretical: Chris uses the Marxist historical materialist vocabulary of "dialectics" as she outwardly behaves in abject and stereotypically "feminine" ways. The melodrama of the scene has a darkly comical effect, even as the feminist politics of her disclosures are problematized: she cites difficult experiences she has had as a woman in a relationship with Lotringer, from having abortions (117) to not being acknowledged in their collaborations (117). These disclosures serve to back up her argument that she is oppressed (as an artist and as an intellectual) in the context of their marriage. Kraus acknowledges how the structure of the heterosexual institution of marriage and her role as "Academic Wife" has held her back to the point of feeling "erased" (117) in the realm of theory and art, leading to her decision to leave her husband in the final line of part 1.

The shift from part 1 to part 2 in the text echoes Frye's observations on the structure of Greek New Comedy characterized by societal shifts over the course of the play. According to Frye, humour and relief occur when those who were in charge at the beginning (the "usurpers") are displaced and "a new society … crystallize(s) around the hero" (163). In *I Love Dick,* this shift is from a patriarchal structure of male theorists (part 1) to a more capacious theoretical space of feminist autotheory (part 2). While Chris's desire for Dick remains ultimately unrequited (despite the two having slept with each other twice), her desire to be an intellectual is achieved. There is no wedding at the end, although there is a looming divorce. In terms of social bonds, Kraus remains in the happily dejected space of the abject woman: a space she shares with the (living and dead) feminist artists, poets, and theorists whom she invokes over the course of part 2. In contrast to the filmic title of part 1 ("Scenes from a Marriage"), part 2,

entitled "Every Letter Is A Love Letter," is firmly rooted in the writerly modes of literature and art criticism. Kraus describes the autotheory of part 2 to Dick as "the manifesto I've addressed to you about snowy woods and female art and finding the 1st Person" (*Dick* 144). The shift from part 1 to part 2 marks a move from the heterosexual institution of marriage as well as a generic move from the bourgeois epistolary form, to a space of post third-wave feminist potentiality rooted in theoretically trenchant feminist essays written in the almost explicitly autobiographical, factually "true" first person perspective.

Considering the different intertextual constitutions of the two parts of the book provides further insight into the function of the mimetic mechanism in *I Love Dick,* where Kraus moves from reproductive to productive mimesis. In part 1, Kraus's theoretical and artistic references are predominantly of men, including male theorists of influence to Lotringer's work and his Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents series, from Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard to Georges Bataille (74), William Burroughs (85), and Michael Taussig (114). When women theorists and writers are referenced, it is in the context of men speaking about them: Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, and Vita Sackville-West (109). "My father's favourite writer is William Burroughs," Kraus states in a moment of non sequitur during her exegesis on Kitaj's painting (201). Within the parameters of the conceptual game that Kraus establishes in *I Love Dick,* the mid-twentieth century countercultural writer William S. Burroughs stands as the discursive Law of the Father or manifestation of patriarchy in the context of twentieth century theory and literature; Kraus has never mentioned her father before in the text, and this information therefore functions less as a moment of character development and more as Kraus cheekily positioning Burroughs as phallic authority in the constellation of intertexts she invokes. Kraus's decision to reference Burroughs, in contrast to more traditional or classically masculine male writers, in relation to phallic authority is significant: the experimentalism of Burroughs's work, which involves a troubling of the symbolic order of language that continues to be read as formally and politically transgressive, is entailed in all kinds of gendered baggage and violence that Kraus is interested in exposing. Burroughs shot his wife, and the fact that he continues to stand as the figurative daddy of a certain twentieth century mode of ultra-cool experimentalism in contemporary literature and theory points to the ways that masculine aggression is at the very heart of these countercultures.

As the patriarchal hegemony of part 1 begins to wane, feminist autotheory emerges in its place. The action of Chris deciding to leave Sylvère

at the end of part 1 inaugurates a shift in intertexts, with Kraus citing a number of notable feminist writers, theorists, activists, and performance artists over the course of part 2 that include Coco Fusco (143), Rigoberta Menchú (146), Judy Chicago (150), Penny Arcade (164), and Alice Notley (168). Using the form of autotheoretical essays that engage the first person with a new rhetorical certainty, Kraus engages in a performative practice of feminist canon formation for the mid to late twentieth century. She no longer displaces the first person on to ciphers (like Emma Bovary[13] or "Chris Kraus"), but instead she writes in the first person, surrounded by an interdisciplinary community of feminists who have articulated their ideas in meaningful and transformative ways. The citational shifts taking place between the two parts of this structurally bifurcated book ("Part I" and "Part II") stand as evidence of the transformations enabled by strategic mimesis.

In the concluding scene when Kraus opens Dick's letter to her and finds "a xerox copy of Dick's letter to Sylvère," there is a sense of resignation coupled with a vague sense of feminist celebration: Kraus "gasped and breathed under the weight of it and got out of the cab and showed her film" (*Dick* 261). While the plot reads as literally disappointing, the themes of the work are consummated to humorous effects: Kraus has written an extensive autotheoretical novel involving various vulnerable and meticulously-crafted "disclosures," presumably to and for this man named Dick (although we know this as a strategic conceit), while Dick has put little to no effort into his correspondence with Chris—his letter to Chris is a cheap copy of the letter he addressed to Sylvère, in which Chris's name is misspelled (260).

Understanding the move toward autotheory

Even though it is a new term, "autotheory" is rife with a history of intellectual problems and paradoxes that have been engaged with in different ways over the history of philosophy, theory, art, literature, and feminism respectively. Autotheory relies on theorizing and philosophizing from the particular situation one is in, drawing from one's own body, experiences, anecdotes, biases, relationships, and affects in order to theorize such topics as ontology, epistemology, politics, ethics, gender, sexuality, or art. In feminist autotheory, the practice of living is material and theoretical and is often as important to the work as the other material practices, like writing philosophy or art criticism and making art. Kraus has an active

13 Chris and Sylvère sign off a letter to Dick as "Charles and Emma Bovary" (*Dick* 106), playfully riffing on the similarities between the two couples.

art practice, having studied performance art with Richard Schechner and having started off as a filmmaker. Most recently, her film and video work was shown in a retrospective exhibition at the commercial art gallery Chateau Shatto in Los Angeles, California, in the spring of 2018.

While works like *I Love Dick* and, more recently, Nelson's *The Argonauts* are explicitly autotheoretical, incorporating discourses of theory and philosophy often quite literally beside the personal and memoiristic (in *The Argonauts*, names of theorists are placed in the margins of a queer life-writing text), there are various antecedents to autotheory in earlier feminist practices in literature, art, and philosophy. Take, for example, the experimentations of proto-postmodern writers and artists like Gertrude Stein and Claude Cahun at the turn of the century, who worked in ways that integrated the body and autobiography with theory and criticism. In a larger sense, autotheory is a characteristic of Western feminism from its earliest moments in history, with works like Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* bringing the personal, the philosophical, and the political together to form a work of political theory. The nineteenth through to the early twentieth century is ripe with examples of literary and philosophical precursors to autotheory as a feminist practice, as feminist writers found the most pressing concerns to write about in their own lived experiences.

The impulse toward autotheory really takes off in the contemporary, post-1960s period. The conceptual art, body art, performance, and intermedial practices of feminist artists working in the 1960s onward, like Adrian Piper, Andrea Fraser, Hannah Wilke, Martha Wilson, and Lisa Steele, to name a few, contribute to a rich history of feminist art attuned to autotheory as an embodied, intellectual stance that takes shape across media. To be sure, in the 1970s, a newly cohering feminist art movement in America foregrounded women's bodies as both physical and conceptual, fueling a renewed autotheoretical practice through the 1980s and 1990s, in the performance art of artists like Karen Finley, Annie Sprinkle, Penny Arcade, and Vaginal Davis. As Amelia Jones convincingly describes in "The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke and the Radical Narcissism of Feminist Body Art," practices of feminist body art allow artists to constitute themselves as both (conceptual) subject and (sexual) object, body and mind, and, in doing so, to challenge longstanding philosophical histories that saw these binaries as mutually exclusive—especially in the case of women.

In the 1960s and 1970s, some feminists working in a French tradition sought to inscribe the particularities of the female body and female subjectivity in text as an alternative language positioned in opposition to phal-

locentric discourse. Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" engaged *écriture féminine* as a new practice of writing that sought distance from masculinist logic and signification through writing the female body. Alongside Cixous, Monique Wittig practised *écriture féminine* as a mode of writing that distanced itself from masculinist logic and signification. This mode marks a point of connection with later French feminists, or, more specifically, Quebecois ones, such as lesbian feminist writer Nicole Brossard, whose *fiction théorique*, an experimental writing practice, found community in the collectively authored text *Theory, A Sunday* (1988).[14] Brossard's writing was described as a new genre of *fiction théorique* because of how it combines feminist theory, philosophy, autobiography, and fictionalization; its status as an antecedent to, or an iteration of, what is now being called autotheory is worth recognizing.

To be sure, contemporary texts described as "autotheory" are often ones that integrate disparate modes in ways that do not easily fit within established genres—an impulse found in the larger history of feminist theorizing. We find this creative shuttling between genres and modes in feminist theoretical writings in the 1980s, for example, from Brossard's fiction théorique or fiction-theory[15] in books like *The Aerial Letter* or Gloria Anzaldúa's experimental code-switching between different languages, dialects, and genres in her unprecedented work of Chicanx feminist theory *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). In each of these texts, there is a self-aware and often performative play with integrating philosophy and feminist theory with forms of autobiography and fictionalization, to different degrees and effects in response to the writer's historical, geographical, and social context in which they were working.

14 Alongside writing by Brossard, *Theory, A Sunday* features work by Louky Bersianik, France Théoret, Gail Scott, Louise Cotnoir, Louise Dupré, and Rachel Levitsky; the women worked collaboratively over a set period of time in conversation with each other to develop the texts that would form this experimental anthology.

15 Theorizing the writing of Nicole Brossard, Canadian feminist critic and translator Barbara Godard describes fiction-theory as follows: "Presented as women's words, however, and put on the page, such memories become *fiction-theory*, fiction deployed as thought experiment or hypothesis ('if … then') to rework the social imaginary or as a writing-machine producing forms to … ['resolve problems of sense'] and … ['subject' reality 'to transformation' (149)]. Such intercepting the real is performed through language and its image or figures in their function as *relays* to *transmission devices*" (198). Godard argues that Brossard's mode of writing fiction-theory is "in order to shift our perceptions" and rupture "what we understand as reality" (199); Godard contextualizes Brossard's fiction-theory in relation to her related practice of "writing as research" which she sustained throughout the 1970s (199).

In 1978, drawing on William S. Burroughs's and Brion Gysin's cut-up method and the explicitly sexualized themes in feminist performance art, Kathy Acker writes *Blood and Guts in High School,* a theoretically-charged, postmodern novel that inscribes an allegorically autobiographical, fragmented female subjectivity while appropriating patriarchal source texts in performative and destabilizing ways.[16] In the early 1990s, Acker's experimental writing practice finds company in the autofictional, trans-medial, and performance-based work published through Native Agents. That press became a home for women writers like Fanny Howe, Ann Rower, Cookie Mueller, Lynne Tillman, Jane DyLynn, Michelle Tea, and Eileen Myles. In *If You're a Girl*, Rower writes in a mode she terms "transfiction," or the transcribing of real-life dialogue in fictionalized contexts (Rower). The texts in Native Agents share a postconfessional,[17] trans-medial, third wave feminist ethos and converge around topics of sex work and pornography, madness and mental illness, sexual violence and transgression, performance art and music, and postpunk subcultures—all written from female-identified perspectives.[18]

While the New Narrative[19] movement coming out of San Francisco in the 1970s and 1980s was engaged with contemporary theory as part of its literary experimentations, it differs from the autotheoretical work of

16 Reading through Chris Kraus's *After Kathy Acker* provides insight into how strategies Kraus employs in her work draw heavily from those of Acker. On Acker's feminist mimesis, for example, Kraus explains how *Empire of the Senseless* appropriates William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (Kraus, Acker 225).

17 In *You Must Make Your Death Public*, the first book-length analysis of Chris Kraus's work, "confession" is disavowed in exchange for "candour" (Meunier) and "disclosure" (Morris) as a way of understanding Kraus's texts.

18 Under Kraus's direction, Native Agents positioned itself as a space for an experimental feminist counterculture within the context of Semiotext(e)'s radical theory; while it made space for working-class and lesbian women exploring transgressive themes around sexuality and identity, it remained predominantly white, a matter which has been remedied in recent Semiotext(e) projects which publish more works by women of colour, including artist-writers Jackie Wang and Veronica Gonzalez Peña.

19 There is a dynamic interplay between the writing published through Native Agents and the literary movement known as New Narrative, which began in San Francisco in 1977. New Narrative has been used to describe the works of writers like Acker, Tillman, Carla Harryman, Gabrielle Daniels, Gail Scott, Camille Roy, Laurie Weeks, Gary Indiana, and Bob Flanagan (Killian and Bellamy i). A mode of writing that traversed genres, New Narrative was influenced by avant-garde developments in poetry—specifically the burgeoning Language poetry of the mid-1970s, which was "poetry conversant with Continental theory, and that was scary, repellant even, to the ideologies that had dominated the poetry world" (viii).

Kraus and others, like Nelson and Claudia Rankine. In their recent historicization of New Narrative, Dodie Bellamy and husband Kevin Killian, both of whom are included in the New Narrative canon, posit the publication of Kraus's *I Love Dick* in 1997 as marking the end of the New Narrative movement and the beginning of something else (505). Even as terms like "critical memoir" circulate in relation to these texts, those working in an autotheoretical mode often emphasize their desire to differentiate what they are doing from preexisting genres. "*I Love Dick* happened in real life," Kraus explains in her 2017 article for *The Guardian,* "but it's not a memoir." Nelson articulates what she understands to be the distinction between memoir and "autotheory," a term which she describes as having been "cribbed from 1970s feminists by way of Beatriz Preciado," the author of *Testo Junkie* (Brushwood and Nelson). Nelson supplants "memoir" with "life-writing," where "life-writing" is distinguished from memoir by virtue of its ontology as a practice—as something active that one does in the present, rather than a genre, where genre is more static and fixed, shaped by preexisting categories and generic expectations (Brushwood and Nelson). "It couldn't be called memoir or nonfiction or autobiography," Sheila Heti says of first reading Kraus's *I Love Dick*, "but it wasn't an essay, nor was it fiction. It seemed to be a form I hadn't encountered before, and a persona I hadn't encountered before" (McBride). In the book, Kraus describes the genre she is creating as "Lonely Girl Phenomenology" (McBride), deliberately creating a new term in an effort to distinguish her cross-disciplinary experimental writing practice from past genres and modes.

"*I Love Dick* happened in real life," Kraus explains in her 2017 article for *The Guardian,* "but it's not a memoir."

Conclusion

The widespread popularity that *I Love Dick* has received in its subsequent editions (2006 in America, 2015 in the UK) has been attributed in part to the shifts in culture brought on by blogging, social media platforms, and engaging with the "confessional culture" of "over-sharing" (Gross) that these new technologies facilitate. Reflecting on the contrast between the demonization of *I Love Dick* in 1997 and its celebration in 2016, Kraus points to the "more porous … boundaries of privacy" that we are accustomed to today (Armitstead and Kraus). Kraus's radical blurring of "art" and "life" in *I Love Dick* is one of the reasons why her work reverberates with millennial feminists: in a postinternet age of widespread disclosure made possible by social media—seen most recently with the #MeToo movement which, emerging from grassroots feminist efforts historically, has had mainstream effects in popular culture—Kraus's disclosures translate to an urgent and contemporary feminist politic. Despite it being over

twenty years old, and despite the speed with which "feminism" as a movement can move past the waves that precede, there is something about *I Love Dick* that continues to resonate with feminist readers today—not least of which being these prescient moves around public disclosure.

Kraus's experimentation, which pushes up against the limits of what is proper both to the patriarchy and to feminism, stands as an example of the potency of artistic and comedic spaces for testing the limits of what is possible, desirable, or effective. Rather than take Kraus's actions in the book literally, we might observe her use of mimetic instantiation and performativity within the larger conceptual context of her writing. Writing from the position of a failed artist who is married to a man wielding significant editorial power in shaping the discourse of contemporary theory in America—theory which, in turn, shapes the dominant understandings of politics and aesthetics (of gender, of art, of language, and so on)—Kraus subverts the systems that suppress her from within. Through explicit self-awareness, reflexive relaying of anecdotes, and informed disclosure, Kraus is unfaithful in her assumption of the role of philosopher's wife, engaging in an extended performance around the figure of "Dick" as part of her "transformation toward self-definition" apart from her husband and, it follows, the patriarchy. Even as the ethics of Kraus's strategies, if taken at face value, can seem suspect—non-consensually implicating someone (regardless of gender) into a public, sexualized game, or willingly debasing herself—Kraus's text adeptly engages the more insidious power dynamics at work in experimental and theory-focused spaces (with their often presumed progressiveness) in a way that is theoretically insightful, politically engaged, and generatively ambivalent. Even as Kraus possesses more power and cultural capital today than she did at the time of her writing *I Love Dick*, her autotheoretical exposing of imbalanced power dynamics in art and academia from the degraded positioning of a failed artist who has a privileged insider/outsider view of things is a complicated contribution to contemporary theory and feminist practice across media that warrants ongoing study by scholars of literature, theory, art, and social and political thought, but also warrants study by any thinker seeking to understand the problematics of living and theorizing as embodied people in self-styled experimental and countercultural scenes.

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