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Towards Minor Autotheory, or Rethinking My Past Anger

There was ample room for conversation during the meetings of the research network *Where are the Women in Scandinavian Landscape Architecture?* Regardless of whether we were engaged in formal academic discussion or in idle talk during coffee breaks, shared dinners, or queues for the lavatory, we would refer back to personal experiences, events, and episodes in our lives. Similarly, when writing the Benjaminian *Denkbilder*, many of us took our starting points in situations that we ourselves had experienced. I found it utterly enjoyable to get glimpses into colleagues' lives, their joys and struggles, and it was revealing to see that there were many shared experiences at the structural level. However, it also made me wary. Was this personal perspective not both narcissistic and limited in explanatory power? Rather than referring to ourselves in arbitrary anecdotes, should we not widen our gaze and do some rigorous research? Having internalised "the knee-jerk dismissal of the autobiographical mode as feminine and therefore self-absorbed and uncritical",[1] I dismissed our turning to personal experience during workshop meetings as unworthy of proper research. As work within the network progressed, however, I came to reconsider the significance of our collective turn to the private and the autobiographical. I started to understand the value it could carry – and that it was not necessarily the expression of a parochial and problematic perspective. Instead, it represented a much wider impulse: autotheory.

Lauren Fournier describes "autotheory" as a term that "emerged in the early part of the twenty-first century to describe works of literature, writing, and criticism that integrate autobiography with theory and philosophy in ways that are direct and self-aware."[2] The term began to trend after the publication of Maggie Nelson's 2015 book *The Argonauts*. It has also been applied to slightly older works, such as Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick*, first published in 1997. It connects closely to transnational feminist practices in art, literature, criticism, and activism. "Indeed, the history of feminism is, in a sense, a history of autotheory", writes Fournier.[3]

1 Desirée Henderson, "Rev. of Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism," *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* (2022): 1–4, 3.

2 Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), 7.

3 Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory*, 8.

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Has the autobiographical mode always been seen as self-absorbed and uncritical? Or does it matter who the author is? Recalling George Orwell's political satire *Animal Farm*, I wonder whether some animals might be more equal than others. Are there male, masculinist, or maybe simply men's ways of doing autotheory? If so, how do they land in the academic community? Do they too have to face accusations of narcissism? When I was trying to answer these questions, I thought of Goethe's *Werther* and Thoreau's *Walden*, canonical works of Western literature that display some autotheoretical characteristics. A couple of more recent examples came to my mind as well. I recalled one paper by a renowned (white, male, middle-aged) geography professor at a Russell Group university in which he explored topographies while running, drawing on his lifelong practice as a long-distance runner. The piece, which contains no references, was published in an international peer-reviewed journal. The essay is beautifully written, and I have used it in my teaching. Yet it rankled with me. I imagined a fit, self-assured man who succeeded in everything he did. *Mens sana in corpore sano*. I was sure he ran far and fast, probably even ran marathons. As if the academy were not competitive enough already. Another example is the personal website of another renowned white male Russell Group professor, this time in political theory and geography. His website features an annual list of his favourite academic books. I remember the (in hindsight, disproportionate) anger I felt when I first discovered those lists. At the time I was on maternity leave, nursing my first child and unwittingly engaging in what British writer Joanna Walsh conceptualises as #theoryplushouseworktheory!: "#theoryplushouseworktheory! involves doing a household, care or personal-upkeep task while reading, listening to or watching works relating to theory and theorists that are freely available online, allowing the worker to think as she works."[4] I was (and still am) awed by his capacity to read and review two or more academic books per month as just one of his countless other duties. Mostly, however, I felt a childish envy – and anger. I was appalled by what at the time I could only read as an act of arrogance. I was angry at my awe, and annoyed at my anger. Was I merely frustrated about the way my life had turned out, sensing that I would not become the critical intellectual and prolific scholar I used to think I had the potential to be, that I would never live the life this professor's website made me assume he was enjoying?

My family and friends urged me to be patient: I too would soon be able to resume my intellectual life, and my career would not suffer just because I had taken a few months' leave. However, I was annoyed by their well-intentioned consolations. Did they not see how competitive academia is today? How decreases in one's

4 Joanna Walsh, *Girl Online: A User Manual* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2022), 47.

publication output lower one's chances of attracting external research funding, without which one will be pushed into the vicious circle of ever more teaching? This was also why I initially sympathised, even overidentified, with Anna, the main character in Sarah Moss's novel *Night Waking*,[5] which I read while at home on maternity leave with child number two. Like me, Anna is torn between mothering and her desire for the pleasures of work and solitude. One book review described Anna as "a furious, self-pitying martyr, self-conscious to the point of satire about her particular niche in the pantheon of middle-class motherhood, [. . .] brave if not [. . .] likeable".[6] I did not share that assessment; at the time, I could not even *understand* it. The book ends with Anna giving a brilliant performance at a job interview thanks to the historical research she has done while taking care of an insomniac toddler and a death-obsessed seven-year-old. I did not feel encouraged by this ending. Rather, I felt oddly betrayed by the fact that my heroine had mastered what I knew I could never have done in her place.

To paraphrase Chris, the main character in *I Love Dick*, to make the world more interesting than my private problems, I have to make those problems social.[7] That, however, is not (or no longer) enough: while the tenet of an earlier wave of feminism was that "the personal is political", this has now turned into the conviction that "the personal is also theoretical: the personal is part of theory's material".[8] One has to use the autobiographical to deepen or nuance an engagement with theory, or vice versa.[9] This, then, is both a potential value of the turn to the personal or even the private – and a criterion to gauge its virtues.

An additional set of virtues emerges when we consider autotheory as a way of doing "minor theory" in the sense that Cindi Katz gives the term.[10] Working with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's interpretation of Franz Kafka's writing as "minor literature", Katz is searching for a way to reconfigure the production of knowledge in geography. For Katz, the terms "major" and "minor" do not describe a binary, nor are they meant to express an evaluation. Rather, they are contextual terms. Major theory encompasses "the theory or theories that are dominant in a particular historical geography under a specific set of conditions. It is major because it is

5 Sarah Moss, *Night Waking* (London: Granta, 2011).

6 Justine Jordan, "Night Waking by Sarah Moss – Review," *The Guardian*, 26 February, 2011.

7 Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* (London: Tuskar Rock Press, 2015), 180.

8 Nancy K. Miller cited in Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory*, 12.

9 Desirée Henderson, "Rev. of Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism," 4.

10 Cindi Katz, "Towards Minor Theory," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14.4 (1996): 596–599; see also Cindi Katz, "Revisiting Minor Theory," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35.4 (2017): 487–499.

dominant in a particular historical geography, not the reverse."[11] Minor theory is "minor" only in relation to a dominant "major" theory. With a change of context, the designations "minor" and "major" could change. Minor theory is thus not a theorising from the outside.[12] Rather, it is a way of working with the same material but subverting it *from within*. Minor theory is about "the conscious use of displacement".[13] What Katz means by this becomes clearer when we look at the example of Kafka. A Czech Jew living in Prague during the first years of the twentieth century, Kafka wrote in German, a major tongue that was neither his first language nor that of his community. He thus worked in a language where he was doubly displaced, pushing his own displacement to its limits, reworking the "major" from within. For Katz, the value of minor theory is thus twofold. First, it has the potential to change the academy by making visible the (theoretical) work of "minoritarian" scholars so that even they can feel "at home" there. Second, it requires "contemporary 'major' theorists [. . .] to take stock of the limits of their geographies, and to be accountable for the worlds they produce in theory and practice".[14]

In the light of minor theory, the personal anecdotes we exchanged at network meetings can be understood as articulations of displacement in a professional and academic world where men's designs, biographies, and modes of working, writing and presenting themselves are still "major". In this context, autotheory appears as a form of "minor theory": it uses the dominant language of theory, but it subverts it from within through its seeming collapse of distance and objectivity and its focus on the private, the everyday, the unpretentious. Doing minor autotheory can function as one starting point to contribute to the bigger project of decolonising theory, including the theory and historiography of landscape architecture, and ultimately also its practice. For this to happen, however, we need endurance, courage – and patience.

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11 Cindi Katz, "Towards Minor Theory," 490.

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Figure 4.8: Letters from Pompeii in cameo layout. Pattern inspired by “The Landscape Architect Ruth Brandberg in Pompeii”.