

Autofiction as a Site of Resistance

Reclaiming Agency in Contemporary Women's Writings

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ABSTRACT: This article examines how contemporary autofiction, particularly by women writers, functions as a site of resistance against gendered literary and cultural norms by disrupting the binary between the personal and the public. Focusing on Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* (1997) and Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* (2014), I argue that these novels employ autofictional techniques such as blending fact and fiction, fragmented narrative structures, formal experimentation, author-character overlap, and heightened emotional expression. I explore how these strategies enable women writers to politicize personal experiences while maintaining protective ambiguity. Ultimately, I contend that these works demonstrate how autofiction allows women to write themselves into the literary field by challenging conventions of authorship, genre, and gender roles. Autofiction's genre-defying innovations thus operate not only as stylistic and meaning-making practices but also as feminist strategies for reclaiming agency and reshaping dominant cultural narratives.

KEYWORDS: Autofiction; Personal; Political; Feminist; Fact and fiction; Gender roles; Authorship; Agency

Becoming feminist: how we redescribe the world we are in. We begin to identify how what happens to me, happens to others. We begin to identify patterns and irregularities.

(Ahmed 27)

Introduction

Chris Kraus's debut novel, *I Love Dick*, was published in 1997. It received little critical attention and was often dismissed or misunderstood. I argue that this dismissive engagement with Kraus's text could be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, it may be due to the novel's vigorous political critique of social and institutional bias against women, articulated through openly referencing Kraus's and others' lived experiences. On the other hand, this critical disregard may be read as congruent with and reflective of the broader antifeminist sentiment prevalent in the public sphere. This initial negative reception is significant because it uncovers the discomfort provoked by *I Love Dick*'s apparent feminist quest and its unapologetic stance against patriarchal authority. As a result, it remained overlooked for years until its later reappraisal as a significant contribution to feminist literature.

A striking example of the negative attention directed at *I Love Dick* is David Rimanelli's review, an artistic director in New York and a contributing editor at the magazine *Artforum*, which

reduces the book to a “literary curiosity” that shows a “lack of obvious literariness” and underlines “Kraus’s exhibitionism and her readers’ voyeurism,” thus trivializing Kraus’s blend of personal confession and theoretical inquiry. Rimanelli begins his review of *I Love Dick* by contending that: “Chris Kraus’s ‘novel’ is a book not so much written as secreted” (Rimanelli). Rimanelli’s review seems to discredit Kraus, the author, rather than focusing on her writing, and ridicules her novel. Rimanelli places quotation marks around “novel” in what seems to be an attempt to further ridicule Kraus’s work and to negatively highlight the book’s formal innovation.

Rimanelli continues to write that, “[p]sychic vomiting and a flat prose style shot through with banal dialogue are staples of a certain kind of ‘experimental’ écriture, a style particularly appealing to wannabe bad boys (and girls) for its supposed rawness and lack of literary affectation” (Rimanelli). While Rimanelli’s review seems to center on Kraus more than her writing, I argue that it goes beyond that, reflecting a broader discomfort and a reluctance to seriously consider writings about women’s desires and frustration, intellectual (and bodily) autonomy, and the display of emotion. Rimanelli’s review is emblematic of the mainstream criticism that refuses to acknowledge the political subtext in women’s writings and their significance in exposing ongoing acts of discrimination. This blatant attack on Kraus and her writing further reinforces the aim of my article: centering the importance of autofictional works in how they challenge not only long-established binaries but also the norms of literary authorship.

Before turning to my main argument, it is essential to situate Kraus’s novel and other contemporary autofictional works by women authors within the larger feminist trajectory that politicizes personal writing. The aim here is to show how these texts challenge dominant cultural narratives by using autofictional elements in ways that defy outdated expectations of women’s writings and emotional labor. In *Video Green*, a collection of essays written by Kraus between 1999 and 2004 about the Los Angeles art scene in the mid- and late nineties, Kraus engages critically with women’s personal narratives and artworks. She examines the works of several artists of the time and presents her own perspective in a sarcastic, straightforward, unembellished tone similar to what she does in *I Love Dick*. In one of her essays, written only two years after publishing *I Love Dick*, Kraus observes:

The willingness of someone to use her life as primary material is still deeply disturbing, and even more so if she views her own experience at some remove. There is no problem with female confession providing it is made within a repentant therapeutic narrative. But to examine things coolly, to thrust experience out of one’s own brain and put it on the table, is still too confrontational. (“Pay Attention” 63)

This echoes Kraus’s project in *I Love Dick*: writing personal experiences not as confession, but as cultural critique. What Kraus asserts here is more than a personal statement; it represents a continuation and a development of a larger feminist project that challenges dominant norms concerning gender and authorship. Earlier feminist movements have fought against the rigid,

gender-based binary of public/private that historically relegated women's experiences to the margins of political discourse. Kraus's quotation clearly addresses this binary by underlining how women's writings were usually acceptable only when they subscribed to a gendered emotional script: being redemptive, therapeutic, and apolitical. By contrast, a novel that examines women's personal experiences "at some remove" (Kraus, "Pay Attention" 63), like *I Love Dick* does, resists categorization as either personal or political, as it simultaneously inhabits both.

Autofictional works, particularly authored by women, build on this foundational idea invoked by feminist movements trying to publicize the personal, thus making it political. In this sense, what autofiction does is not entirely new. It builds on already existing foundations of feminist activism to expose the continuous gender-based discrimination and to develop innovative ways of resistance. Thus, I argue that autofictional writings, such as *I Love Dick*, create a literary space where personal narratives are central instead of marginal. Rather than being dismissed as emotional, anecdotal, or therapeutic, these narratives confront structural exclusions and reframe the personal as inherently political. Autofiction, with its focus on the personal histories of its authors, reshapes the public sphere by creating a space that challenges the binary of the personal and the public/political.¹

In 1997, when *I Love Dick* by Chris Kraus was first published, autofiction was not yet a popular genre in the US. In France, where the genre emerged, autofiction was stigmatized as a marginal form of writing and, as Marjorie Worthington explains, "often seen (and criticized) as a feminine enterprise" (qtd. in Meyers, "Does Autofiction" 41). The genre's unreliable depiction of reality, its portrayal of the everyday lives of ordinary people, and the fact that it had been popular among women writers are all factors that gave autofiction a "bad" reputation and caused its marginalization before its celebrated reception in the US. Many women writers opted to embrace this marginalization and continued writing. Writing autofiction is, thus, a political strategy that helps create what Karen Meyers calls a "democratized authorship" where "white male author's privilege, therefore, diminishes ever further" ("Does Autofiction" 32).

Accordingly, it is not surprising that, over time, *I Love Dick* has been rediscovered and celebrated for its innovative form and feminist themes. The little critical engagement that *I Love Dick* initially received was negative, and it uncovers the novel's provocative nature and its departure from conventional storytelling. These qualities have contributed to the novel's later positive reception as new prints were published in 2006, 2012, and 2016. Additionally, the novel was adapted to a television series with the first episode premiering in 2016 and the full season released in 2017. This shift in the scholarly perspective within a relatively short time span marks the rising popularity of autofiction and, in particular, women's autofictional

¹ While the public is not a synonym for the political, the process of making the personal a public matter is a political act in the context of women's autofictional writings.

writings. Thus, the literary scene has witnessed a recent proliferation of autofictional writings that play on the divide between reality and fiction.²

In this article, I examine how this genre enables women to politicize personal experiences through experimental narrative strategies that challenge dominant expectations around the concepts of authorship, genre, and gender. Accordingly, I will begin to outline the theoretical framework that defines autofiction and its significant elements. This framework also centers the feminist efforts of turning the personal into a political discourse. Afterward, I will explain how women authors have benefitted from this genre by looking closely at examples from *I Love Dick* (1997) by Chris Kraus and *Dept. of Speculation* (2014) by Jenny Offill. These two novels, published seventeen years apart, break from conventional, linear storytelling by using fragments, self-reflexive contemplations, and collages of thoughts to construct their narratives. These novels also involve a mixture of fiction and facts, and they provide a meta-exploration of literary theory that further complicates the narrated stories and calls for the readers' active participation and engagement with the text. Moreover, both novels explore not only the personal and intimate lives of women writers but also turn them into a public discourse questioning the structures that render them marginal. Whether it is Kraus's epistolary pursuit of "Dick" or Offill's protagonist traversing the complexities of marriage and selfhood, these novels invoke conversations beyond stylistic choices and employ feminist narrative strategies that open up discussions about literary norms, autonomy, and authorship.³

As stated, this article focuses on the autofictional works of Chris Kraus and Jenny Offill, who are white, Western, middle-class authors. While I acknowledge that autofiction as a genre includes an increasingly diverse range of writers in terms of racial, cultural, and national differences, white women's voices are undeniably prominent. This reflects the structural whiteness of the publishing industry and the literary field in a broader sense, not only among women writers. Thus, the aim of this article is not to generalize the experiences in these two works or take them as representative of all women's autofiction; rather, it analyzes them as case studies situated within a still uneven terrain of literary recognition.

Theorizing the Autofictional Turn: Fact, Fiction, and the Feminist Form

² *I Love Dick* has been recognized by critics, such as Lauren Oyler in *Vice* (2016), Lauren Fournier in *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2021), and Leslie Jamison in *The New Yorker* (2015) -among others- as one of the seminal autofictional texts that helped popularize the term in the US since the late-1990s and foreground feminist efforts to politicize the personal.

³ While autofictional writings in general share many similarities in form and content, they vary in their incorporation of autofictional elements. They range from the highly fictionalized narratives to near-realistic narratives and everything that falls in between, as I will demonstrate in the textual examples later in this article.

The term “autofiction” was coined by Serge Doubrovsky in France in 1977; later, it became known and popularized in the US in the mid-1990s.⁴ Since autofiction migrated from the Francophone to the Anglophone world, new theorizations and writings have emerged, signifying the outset of a new genre that has been garnering increased popularity in the US. Serge Doubrovsky defines autofiction as a “[f]iction, of strictly real events and facts” (qtd. in Worthington 6). This definition of autofiction highlights its main premise as a genre that combines both fiction and facts, without being contradictory. Meyers defines autofiction in its essence as “a narrative which has a strictly autobiographical subject matter [...] but whose manner, that is the narrative organization and stylistic craft, is novel-like” (“Does Autofiction” 28). Meyers explains that the link between life stories narrated in a fictionalized way is constitutive of autofictional writings. She clarifies that autofiction, particularly in the Anglophone world, is defined through “its intention to blend fiction into life writing, through the fictionalization of real people, by disregarding some of the conventions of truth-telling on which autobiography is constructed” (“Does Autofiction” 31). Thus, Meyers not only differentiates autofictional writings from autobiographical writings that claim to document one’s life events but also sets autofiction apart from other forms of life writing, such as autobiographies and memoirs.

Autofiction’s increasing popularity reflects broader cultural and intellectual debates about the concepts of truth, authorship, and representation—debates that have increasingly questioned the porous boundaries between the discourses of history, memory, and fiction. While these debates have existed in various cultural traditions, this article focuses primarily on the genre’s developments in the US context. For much of the US and broader Western intellectual (mainstream) history, roughly since the Enlightenment through the early 20th century, historical documentation claimed to mirror reality and remain objectively composed by means of empirical observation and rational analysis.⁵ This long-standing belief in a potential objective representation of history has fostered an epistemological divide between history and fiction in the dominant public sphere, classifying the former as accurate and truthful, and the latter as imaginative and invented. However, with the emergence of postmodernism and post-structuralism in the late 20th century, this binary has been further contested, especially in Anglophone North America. In 1988, shortly before autofiction became popular in the US, Linda Hutcheon suggested that “the certainty of direct reference of the historical novel or even the nonfictional novel is gone” (124), emphasizing that history and fiction share narratological structures.

⁴ The rise of autofiction coincides with—and is in part shaped by—what Patricia Clough calls the “affective turn” of the mid-1990s. These two shifts intersect in meaningful ways, particularly in their shared emphasis on embodied experiences, emotions, and subjectivity.

⁵ For example, Linda Hutcheon, in *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), explains that postmodernism’s historiographic metafiction (which belongs to postmodern fiction) aims to deneutralize history by re-assessing the objectivity of historical representation and advocating, instead, for a history of representation(s).

Part of the postmodern legacy (prior to the autofictional turn) in the US is the distinction between history and its representation(s). Along these lines, fiction could be thought of as a truthful, but not necessarily a factual representation of reality. As Hutcheon explained, “[h]istory is not made obsolete: it is, however, being rethought – as a human construct” (16). Based on this premise, history (or facts) and fiction are not thought of as interchangeable, nor as dichotomies. The outcome of challenging this dichotomy is that the hegemonic politics of historical documentation are more acceptable tools for constructing a legitimate narrative, in many cases, the narrative of those who have the power to do so. This shift in perception has signaled a growing awareness of the constructedness and the factual ambiguity of a given text, prompting a reconsideration of how a text is created and consumed. Autofictional writings lie at the intersection of this ambiguity: neither precisely factual nor entirely fictional.

The narrowing gap between the differentiation of fact and fiction has both empowered and been accelerated by the rise of autofiction—a genre that combines the personal histories and the creative fictional narratives of its authors. This development represents, in my view, a necessary and timely shift within literature, one that responds to the increasing complexity of the debates around the nature of the concepts of truth, authorship, and representation in contemporary literature and culture. Autofiction, according to Meyers, “articulates to the reader that the author is not honest, but sincere” (“Does Autofiction” 28), which underlines a potential reality instead of a factual one, because in autofictional writings, according to Per Krogh Hansen, we find that “stories tell the (or some) truth, even though what they are telling might not have happened” (Hansen 49) and “the distinction between lying and the truth is disregarded” (Hansen 48).

More importantly, “the fictional part of autofiction can ‘protect’ the author in that it allows him/her to ramble on about the self and especially to confess without exposing others” (Meyers, “No Need to Fight for a Place in the Limelight” 209). This protection creates two results: on the one hand, authors of autofiction have more freedom in writing due to the fictional framing it provides. On the other hand, readers are more involved, as they are invited to actively participate in a puzzle-solving game—one provoked by the overlaps between the authors' real lives and their writings, which can range from subtle similarities to the blatant naming of real people and locations, thus encouraging readers to search both inside and outside the text to discern what is real and what is fictional.

I argue that autofiction's redefinition of facts and fiction is significant, particularly to women writers. Women have been historically marginalized in literary conventions and academia, often constrained by societal norms and expectations. Therefore, due to the blending of fiction and reality, autofiction creates a shield behind which women writers can partially hide and protect themselves while writing about their personal experiences. The strategic selection and blurring of facts and fiction become a political leverage point, allowing them “to write themselves into culture” (Maguire 14). Thus, autofiction grants women writers the tools to approach topics that are considered sensitive, controversial, or even taboo without the compromise of exposing themselves to the public. This, according to Maguire, creates “a

challenge to dominant schemes of cultural value and identity [that] has emerged as a key mode of scholarly engagement with narratives of marginalized sexualities, ethnicities, gender, and classes” (15). Therefore, the same autofictional elements that have been criticized by many for their purposeful distortion of facts have become tools for women writers to destabilize the politics of the writing scene and to resist established cultural and political norms, as well as the norms of writing.

Reshaping the Public and the Private

The separation between the public and the private is a long-standing, gendered, cultural, and social divide. Michael Warner, in *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), explains that “[o]ften the impression seems to be that public and private are abstract categories for thinking about law, politics, and economics. And so they are. But their power, as feminism and queer theory have had to insist, goes much deeper” (23). Warner’s assertion frames the public and private not as physical, but rather abstract, discursive spaces where knowledge and meaning are continuously produced, negotiated, and transformed. Warner also underlines the authoritative power of the public/private binary that prolongs assumptions about traditional gender roles. Moreover, Warner recognizes the difficulty in challenging this established binary that “can seem quasi-natural” (24), asserting that it is rather constructed, unfixed, and inconsistent.

Additionally, Warner elaborates on the gendered nature of the public/private when he asserts:

In the case of gender, public and private are not just the formal rules about how men and women should behave. They are bound up with meanings of masculinity and femininity. Masculinity, at least in Western cultures, is felt partly in way of occupying public space; femininity, in a language of private feeling. (24)

This underlines how public expression is often coded as masculine, while the introspective or emotional ways of behaving are marginalized and deemed feminine.

The binary between public/private has long infiltrated and shaped the literary terrain. Literature, as a medium that publicly mediates authors’ thoughts and experiences, has not been equally accessible for everyone. For centuries, literature has been dominated by certain voices, while others have been systematically silenced or ignored. In an era often described as “postgender,” women writers continue to navigate entrenched cultural norms and societal expectations.⁶ Although the oppression of women’s voices is not as explicit or severe as it had

⁶ The concept of postgender assumes that the acceptance of gender fluidity and the deconstruction of traditional gender roles have been achieved. Lucy E. Bailey and Karen Graves warn against theories of postgender and write that “this postgender discourse suggests that equity initiatives may no longer be necessary if women and girls can freely shed the sexist or gendered constraints of the past to invent, seize, and actualize a range of possible selves and a degree of agency, and educational and social mobility” (689).

been in some areas—at least in the US context—the burden of conventional gender roles has not disappeared. Instead, it has mutated into more subtle forms of oppression that dictate what is deemed (un)acceptable in the still gendered spaces of literature and academia. This is evident in the reception of autofiction, where male writers like Karl Ove Knausgård are often praised for the depth of their writings, while women writers exploring similar topics—such as Chris Kraus and Jenny Offill—are often dismissed as self-absorbed or oversharing. The politics of form, genre, and authorship remain gendered, reinforcing invisible hierarchies regarding what kinds of personal narratives are granted cultural legitimacy.

In the context of feminist theory, particularly feminist critiques of the public/private binary, such as those by Carole Pateman, Michael Warner explains that challenging the public/private binary requires “an entire transformation of gender roles, for men as well as women, leading to a world in which the differences between women and men would be systemically uncoupled from the divisions between home and the public, individual and collective life, personal and political” (33). This statement explicitly echoes the famous slogan of second-wave feminism, “the personal is political.” Thus, challenging this binary requires more than making the public sphere accessible to women; it demands a rethinking of the ideologies that created the divide. I argue that this call for systemic rethinking finds a compelling literary expression in the genre of autofiction, as it creates a space that does not overtly subscribe to either the private or the public. Accordingly, autofiction could be understood as a space outside this binary altogether, where authors, particularly women authors, gain the freedom to navigate personal experiences and situate them within broader cultural, societal, and political contexts without claiming factual accuracy of these experiences.

Autofictional Self-Positioning

Beyond its categorical and factual ambiguity, autofiction offers a flexible framework for exploring identity through narrative self-positioning. Wolfgang Iser explains the “third space” as a conceptual space that goes “beyond the binary logics of an ‘either-or’ or ‘in-out’ and thus allow[s] for the development of self-positions beyond these oppositions” (69). Along these lines, I argue that autofiction functions similarly, offering a narrative space outside binary logic where the boundaries between fact and fiction, author and character, and private/public are blurred. Wolfgang Iser writes about spatiotemporal relativity in defining and positioning one’s self in relation to others, suggesting that identities are temporally and spatially contingent. He maintains that “[t]he identity of the speaker is constructed by taking on subject positions, which are implied by specific ways of telling one’s own story” (71). Thus, Wolfgang Iser emphasizes how one can acquire subject positions instead of being the object of writing. This is especially significant in autofiction, where the overlap of author, narrator, and protagonist allows authors to move beyond a singular “I”.

Building on this idea of assuming subject positions, autofiction opens up a discursive space in which (a mix of real and fictional) identities can be articulated, not conditioned by fixed

categories but shaped through the shifting dynamics of storytelling. In a similar vein, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson expand on the fluidity of the self by explaining how the “I” is not a unified entity. In *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, they write:

What do we encounter as readers/listeners when we come to an “I” on a page or hear an “I” in a story told to us? [...] this “I” is not a flesh-and-blood author whom we cannot know, but a speaker or narrator who refers to him- or herself. But much more is involved in this self-referentiality. While the speaker has one name, the “I” who seems to be speaking –sometimes through a published text or an intimate letter, sometimes in person or on screen- is composed of multiple “I”s. (71)

In the context of Smith and Watson’s argument, the multiple “I”s in a text refer to a nonstable, unfixed sense of the self that resonates with the spatiotemporal relativity explained by Wolfgang Kraus. In other words, the “I” is not singular; rather, it is a composite shaped by cultural, textual, and spatiotemporal elements. I argue that autofiction further complicates this multiplicity of the “I”s through the overlaps between the author, the narrator, and the protagonist. This further destabilizes the public/private distinction as autofiction blends the author’s “real” and “fictional” selves from different vantage points by weaving together fragments of imagination, memory, reality, fiction, and critique.

Since autofiction makes memory, intimacy, and emotionality the content of a public narrative, it emphasizes how the personal is inherently political. In autofictional writings, the divide between the subjective personal and the collective political collapses, demonstrating how personal matters shape and are shaped by the politics and structures of power. As a result, women writers of autofiction acquire the means to regain their agency and control the way they narrate their stories. Autofictional writings by women, thus, challenge established scripts of femininity when women authors write themselves as active subjects rather than narrated objects, turning the act of storytelling into a form of resistance.

***I Love Dick* by Chris Kraus**

I Love Dick is divided into two main parts: the first is written from the perspective of a third-person female narrator who shares an intimate and detailed account of the protagonist’s personal life, named Chris Kraus, and the way she engages, along with her husband, Sylvère Lotringer, in a game of writing letters to a person named Dick without sending them.⁷ Most of the letters are about Kraus’s infatuation with Dick, the lack of intimacy in her marriage, and memories of her struggles as a young artist. The second part marks a change in the novel as

⁷ In a 2015 review in *The Guardian* of *I Love Dick*, Joanna Walsh writes: “The eponymous ‘Dick’ is the British academic Dick Hebdige. Sylvère is real, too: Kraus’s ex-husband, with whom she still runs Semiotext(e), a publisher of cultural theory, avant-garde fiction and essays by authors who, like Kraus, work at the intersection of writing and art”.

Kraus shifts to a first-person narrator and explores topics such as art, religion, politics, feminism, mental health, and writing.

The core question posed in *I Love Dick* is: “WHO GETS TO SPEAK AND WHY?” (Kraus 175; capitalization in original). In the novel, Kraus overtly challenges the constructed separation between the personal and the public. Along these lines, the end of the novel presents the following question: “If women have failed to make ‘universal’ art because we’re trapped within the ‘personal’, why not universalize the ‘personal’ and make it the subject of our art?” (195). Kraus arrives at this question after thoroughly delving into an analysis of several artworks by women artists who were subjected to aggressive criticism by men, deeming it “undignified” for a woman “to trash herself” (196) by exposing the personal. This question comes at the end as the very reason for writing the experimental novel *I Love Dick*.

In her attempt to universalize the personal, Kraus narrates an incident, one that cannot be verified as real or imagined; nonetheless, it is a direct questioning of women’s gender-based exclusion from academic circles and events, as she writes:

“Who’s Chris Kraus?” she screamed. “She’s no one! She’s Sylvère Lotringer’s wife! She’s his ‘Plus-one’!” No matter how many films she made and how many books she edited, she’d always keep being seen as no one by anyone who mattered so long as she was living with Sylvère. (100)

As the quotation demonstrates, Chris Kraus’s name was not on the invitation list for a glamour-scene party held and attended by Kraus and her husband’s academic circle of friends in New York. In this example, asking “Who’s Chris Kraus?” followed by the exclamation “She’s no one!” underscores the sexism in academia that measures women’s worth by their proximity to an established male figure, not by the merits of their intellectual contributions. As such, this example encapsulates key autofictional techniques and themes, particularly in exposing what could be personal experiences accompanied by the struggle to regain women’s subjectivity in a male-dominated intellectual and artistic realm.

The second exclamation in quotations, “Plus-one!”, shows how a woman is reduced to an accessory rather than an independent subject. Kraus uncovers women’s invisibility and subordination as a systemic form of marginalization and exposes a long-standing history of gender bias that pushes women to the periphery. Moreover, there is an onomastic correspondence between the author, the narrator, and the protagonist named Chris Kraus, as well as the husband’s name Sylvère Lotringer (Kraus’s intradiegetic and extradiegetic husband), in addition to their circles of friends, occupations, and the places they go to, all of which are elements that create a confessional sense in the text. This also increases the level of readers’ engagement with the text. As the level of referentiality gets stronger, the novel, veiled under the guise of fiction, invites the readers to try to discover what is real and what is fictional.

By exposing intimate and personal details typically relegated to the private realm, Kraus makes the case that personal issues are inherently political and worthy of public examination. This

politicization of the personal is, in fact, one of “the most distinctive and controversial” (Man Ling Lee 163) legacies of second-wave feminism. This legacy aimed to go beyond “therapeutic relief” by opening up and sharing with the aim of structural change on “both personal and social levels” (Man Ling Lee 164). Contemporary authors of autofiction, particularly women authors like Chris Kraus, have inherited this legacy and expanded on the politicization of the personal, with their attempts to foreground intimate, confessional, and often uncomfortable self-disclosures as acts of resistance to and commentary on social and political injustices.

In *I Love Dick*, the protagonist claims her agency, which is marked by the shift from the third-person narrator to the first-person narrator, making the narrative more intimate and personal in the second half of the novel. She confronts the dismissal of women's voices as emotional or excessive, turning those very traits into sources of power. In her own unapologetic, raw way of writing, she also critiques the institutions that mediate cultural value—academia, the art world, and literary circles—highlighting how these spaces privilege “male genius” and marginalize others.

In one of her letters to Dick in the second half of the novel, Kraus writes:

To be female still means being trapped within the purely psychological. No matter how dispassionate or large a vision of the world a woman formulates, whenever it includes her own experience and emotion, the telescope's turned back on her. Because emotion's just so terrifying the world refuses to believe that it can be pursued as discipline, as form. Dear Dick, I want to make the world more interesting than my problems. Therefore, I have to make my problems social. (180)

In this part, Kraus further exposes the sexist attitude toward women artists and writers that not only marginalizes them but also relegates them to what she calls the “purely psychological”. This diagnosis of the academic realm is congruent with the historical tendency of deeming women hysterical, emotional, and thus irrational. Kraus criticizes the persistent confinement of women to the realm of the personal. However, instead of reversing the binary, she embraces the personal and renders it a political matter. The metaphor of the telescope does more than mirror Rimanelli's critique of Kraus's *I Love Dick* that I mentioned in the introduction: on the one hand, it uncovers a systemic pattern in turning the lens back to the woman author instead of her writing, on the other hand, it subverts this act by exposing it and highlighting Kraus' self-consciousness about the issue.

The telescope metaphor also brings the issue of voyeurism into question: the woman writer is not an observer of the world, but rather an object of observation, being subjugated to the male gaze and scrutiny. Situating this in an autofictional context, Kraus resists the prolonging of different forms of marginalization by turning emotions into form. Here, Kraus challenges the hierarchical distinction that privileges rationality over emotions in a patriarchal landscape where emotions are judged to be disruptive to reason and logical thinking and, therefore, inadequate in public and intellectual discourses. Accordingly, autofiction blurs the lines

between a personal story and theoretical discourses, thus creating a new space, a third space, by insisting that the personal is a matter of political and public discourses.

Chris Kraus goes a step further when she shares the burden of responsibility as a woman whose voice is also silenced, as she continues to write:

I've fused my silence and repression with the entire female gender's silence and repression. I think the sheer fact of women talking, being, paradoxical, inexplicable, flip, self-destructive but above all else *public* is the most revolutionary thing in the world. I could be 20 years too late but epiphanies don't always synchronize with style. (194, emphasis in original)

In this example, Kraus recognizes that her silence is not an individual but a larger, collective issue. This echoes feminist perspectives that view women's oppression as structural and institutional rather than individual. The second part of the novel further highlights the shift in the narrative voice, as the narrator progresses in claiming more agency. This explicitly showcases that, for Kraus, voice and identity are not only personal issues, which is a notion marked not only by the content but also by the shift to the first-person narrator. Here, Kraus's (the author, the protagonist; the line is blurred in this regard, too) narration of her personal experiences is a form of feminist solidarity and resistance in the politicization of personal matters by making them public.

***Dept. of Speculation* by Jenny Offill**

Since autofictional writings rely on a mix of personal histories and fictional narratives, they are highly individualized, and every text is unique. Accordingly, autofictional writings can be understood as a spectrum of texts, ranging from the highly fictional to the near-factual. This increases the author's freedom in deciding what they choose to expose and what they wish to veil. To further explore the argument of this article and to showcase the diverse outcomes of employing different autofictional elements in literature, I will turn to a more recent autofictional text (published in 2014) that navigates between the borders of the public and the personal, namely Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation*.

In this novel, the line separating fact from fiction is less detectable than in Kraus's *I Love Dick*, as it subtly hints at the author's real-life experiences and strategically turns them into a broader discussion of women's political issues, such as maintaining autonomy in the public sphere and the related struggles that come with it in a predominantly male-dominated world. Offill's fragmented narrative, composed of short, aphoristic passages, reflects the chaotic, nonlinear nature of contemporary life as experienced by its female protagonist. These fragments move fluidly between the narrator's personal life—her marriage, motherhood, and inner reflections—and broader cultural and philosophical issues, citing artists, writers, and scientists. This puzzle-like structure becomes a metaphor for the interconnectedness of the

personal and the public, emphasizing that private struggles are inseparable from cultural and intellectual contexts.

Considering the title of the novel, its creative construction calls for a deeper exploration. *Dept. of Speculation* is a very peculiar title since the first part, “Dept.,” suggests a bureaucratic institution or a public entity devoted to “speculation,” an abstract and often subjective thought process. Upon reading the novel, readers learn that this department is none other than marriage itself: the private matters of a marriage and the politics of the marriage institution. Therefore, the title implies that personal concerns—marriage, motherhood, and identity— are also serious social and public issues.

A few pages into the novel, the unnamed protagonist, referred to as the “wife,” makes clear how differently women experience the world and how they are denied public success. She explains:

My plan was to never get married. I was going to be an art monster instead. Women almost never become art monsters because art monsters only concern themselves with art, never mundane things. Nabokov didn’t even fold his own umbrella. Vera licked his stamps for him. (8)

The weight of the past tense in this example is burdened with the long history of relegating women to the private realm, and the comparison to Nabokov and his wife anchors this issue in the extradiegetic world. Here, mentioning Nabokov and his wife is not merely anecdotal; it is instead symbolic of women’s invisible labor and their subordination in comparison to a man’s creativity. This part also highlights how contemporary autofictional writings continue the feminist critiques of domesticity.

In *Dept. of Speculation*, the protagonist and all other main characters remain unnamed (wife, husband, daughter, friend, neighbor, etc.). This, I argue, turns this fragmented experimental text into a case study, one where characters are reduced to functional roles, thus publicizing what is considered to be a personal matter. This anonymity allows the narrator’s private story to transcend the purely individual, inviting readers to see her experiences as representative of broader, collective concerns. In one instance, the protagonist contemplates:

That night my husband complains that I’m working too much. He grumbles about the overflowing trash and the out-of-season fruit rotting in the fridge. I clean out all the moldy things and empty all the trash cans. I line the garbage bags up by the door before I take them out, hoping he will comment. He gives me a look. The one that means: What do you want? A medal? (87-88)

This is a textbook example of ignoring women’s domestic labor, which exemplifies how autofictional narratives provide the space where personal experiences are reconfigured as literary form and part of both public and political discourses. At the same time, Offill’s use of dry humor in the question “What do you want? A medal?” carries a tragicomic tone that

counters the patriarchal control evident in this example. The humor does not erase the pain; however, it highlights the absurdity of gender bias and makes it impossible to be overlooked.

In this passage, the narrator's hope for recognition, “hoping he will comment,” and her husband's dismissive “look” reflect a profound asymmetry: the narrator's efforts to maintain their shared life go unnoticed, while her husband's implicit expectation that she will perform these tasks reinforces outdated gender roles. This dynamic highlights how domestic labor, mainly connoted as a feminine task, remains excluded from the cultural value systems of the public sphere. By giving voice to these tensions, *Dept. of Speculation* exposes the patriarchal bias of the public sphere and works to include the invisible labor and emotional complexity of women's lives. Moreover, while this part is a call for recognition and emotional support, there is a clear detachment of form from content. Here, the sentences are short, successive, and narrated in a minimalist way, as opposed to the elaborate, emotional, or confessional descriptions that one would expect in a similar exchange. This structure, the implicit irony, along with the simple present tense, show how such activities have become a one-sided habit and a performance delivered only by the “wife” in a near-robotic manner. This underlines the protagonist's detachment not only from these daily activities but also from her surrounding environment, namely, her partner and marriage.

This example shows autofiction's ability to straddle fictionalization and reality while also maneuvering emotional excess. Additionally, while the unnamed narrator/protagonist does not overtly share the same name as the author, the potential correspondence and subtle similarities persist throughout the novel. This, in turn, allows Offill, the author, to turn a mundane moment in the life of a married couple into a visible, charged scene. This is due to autofiction's ability to disrupt the restrictions of private life by turning them into a public, politically charged discourse. The sheer fact of writing, publishing, and reading such stories is a form of resistance to the established writing conventions while keeping the author's level of personal involvement and privacy intact.

Here, autofiction stands out as a form of writing that mediates women's struggles since it resists a narrative closure, favoring a collage of fragments, thoughts, doubts, and interruptions, thus deviating from linear and plot-driven texts. While there is a clear overlap between autofictional and other forms of writing in incorporating these narrative elements, what distinguishes autofiction is how such elements are directly bound to the lived experiences of the author. I claim that, in autofiction, such elements are not simply stylistic choices; they are instead political means to represent the instability of identity under patriarchy without detaching from personal and deeply intimate experiences. Simultaneously, autofiction grants its authors, as in *Dept. of Speculation*, the ability to incorporate their authorial presence into the text without full exposure. Accordingly, this tension between telling and withholding, as well as the novel's fragmented, ambiguous, and often contradictory nature, reflects the complexity of women's lived experiences in a patriarchal world.

In *Dept. of Speculation*, the protagonist's husband has an affair. This adds to the wife's mental burden as she contemplates leaving the marriage or forgiving the husband. After the readers learn of the wife's struggles due to her husband's infidelity, as well as her internal conflict navigating the different roles she performs as a writer, a wife, and a mother, the narrator unfolds the following: "The husband and wife whisper-fight now in the gloves-off approved way. She calls him a coward. He calls her a bitch. But still they aren't good at it yet. Sometimes one or the other stops in the middle and offers the other a cookie or a drink" (171). I argue that this passage has a detached, clinical tone, does not follow a coherent linear narrative, and violates the readers' expectations of a satisfying resolution at the end. The emotional depth is implied rather than explicitly stated, which presents the readers with the chance to interpret and engage with the text based on their understanding and the relatability of the story. Keeping a distance from explicitly realistic or highly fictionalized narratives preserves the autofictional ambiguity of the text and leaves more room for potentiality than certainty.

In this example, the "now" signals the endurance of conflict rather than a conflict resolution. Here, fighting loses spontaneity and emotional involvement; fighting becomes a new, mundane, habitual activity. The couple's emotional connection has faded to the extent that fighting does not constitute a rupture in their marriage. This normalization of conflict reflects a broader sense of emotional detachment. The lack of resolution is, in essence, anticlimactic and could be reflective of the unembellished domestic life and, therefore, critical of the idealized notion of marital bliss.

Unlike the gendered, one-sided, invisible labor in doing housework, the "performance" of fighting is a shared activity between the wife and the husband, where both are following the script their unnamed characters play. This is further reinforced through the exchange of insults. Both insults, "coward" and "bitch," are laden with gendered implications, with the former jabbing at the husband's manhood and the latter attacking the wife's expected femininity and chastity. These insults function as a reminder of the deeply entrenched sexist stereotypes.

The insults are then followed by a sudden offering of a cookie or a drink. There is an underpinning of the absurdity of such a gesture. On the one hand, it underlines the meaninglessness of fighting. On the other hand, it shows the irony in establishing "fighting" as the norm in their marriage, while the nice gesture comes across as disruptive and out of place. This normalization of conflict in the marriage anchors the novel's larger refusal to portray an emotional spectacle or narrative closure. This creates a neutral, anticlimactic, anti-cathartic, almost clinical tone instead of a dramatic one. Thus, the novel reflects the absurdity of real-life situations with the slow decay of intimacy and the repetition of disappointments. In this, the autofictional form becomes a means to establish the ambiguity and contradictions of real life.

A few lines later, on the same page, Offill quotes the Austrian poet and novelist Rainer Maria Rilke: "*What Rilke said: Surely all art is the result of one's having been in danger, of having*

gone through an experience all the way to the end, to where no one can go any further” (171, emphasis in original). This reference to Rilke underlines the protagonist’s reflection on her decision to stay in her marriage. It also represents the culmination of the novel’s larger project, as I argue, to destabilize the public/private binary and move beyond it by creating an autofictional space that turns personal matters into public discourse. In this example, one can detect the “wife’s” detachment from her marital problems. This could garner sympathy and forgiveness on the reader’s part toward the “wife” who seems to sacrifice her personal preferences in favor of the collective: the family. The rationalization of the wife’s choice to stay in her marriage is disguised in Rilke’s quotation, favoring art over personal comfort. Here, the protagonist indirectly states that she has to stay in her marriage in order to live this experience to the end, and eventually, to produce art, which could be read as a reference to the novel itself and by extension to Offill’s experiences.

In the above examples, and in *Dept. of Speculation* at large, the reference to the characters as types—“the wife,” “the husband,” “the daughter,” “the friend”—underlines how specific individual experiences are presented as generalizable experiences that are public and political, not only personal. The missing names are one of the significant indicators that the novel is neither solely domestic nor purely personal; it belongs to a larger socio-political discourse. Additionally, the mundane scenes and their juxtaposition with philosophical and scholarly observations further reinforce the text’s saturation with political significance. Such mundane moments reflect systemic problems regarding gender roles as well as women’s emotional burden and invisible labor. The built-in detachment, fragmentation, and irony that highlight the contradictions of social norms are a form of formal resistance that is made possible through autofiction.

Conclusion

There has been much criticism directed at these two novels, *I Love Dick* by Chris Kraus and *Dept. of Speculation* by Jenny Offill, as well as autofiction at large. Autofiction has been criticized as a marketing label, a buzzword, or a trend in writing due to the rise of the “I-Narratives” and the possible growing acceptability of the genre, simultaneous with the growing margins of financial profit.⁸ Moreover, since autofiction is a developing genre and theory, the ambiguity surrounding the term and the lack of a clear definition are additional aspects that provoke criticism. Furthermore, the opposition of facts and fiction is an obsolete dichotomy in autofictional writings, since autofiction can be truthful without necessarily adhering to facts, which adds to autofiction’s ambiguity. While these claims can be—at least partially—validated, autofiction is still a promising field of investigation that offers great potential and lends itself to further developments. For women writers, there is a lot at stake

⁸ As an example of a critique of the genre of autofiction see Brooke Warner in *PublishersWeekly.com* and Zuhri James in *The London Magazine*.



when they uncover personal matters, and autofiction provides them with the essential means to speak up without exposing themselves.

In *I Love Dick*, there are many shared intradiegetic and extradiegetic aspects between the protagonist and the author: both share the name, profession, age, upbringing, husband, and circle of friends, in addition to further details like specific places, dates of the letters Kraus writes with her husband, as well as Dick's letter (presumably the real Dick's, real letter) at the end of the novel. In this, readers have no way to verify if this narrative holds more facts than fiction. Although *I Love Dick* feels hyper-personal and factual, the readers cannot pin this down and separate facts from fiction. In fact, the overload of detailed information in the novel draws more attention to its constructedness. By demonstrating the interplay of narrative form and content, the novel shows how autofiction allows authors to manipulate perception, blend truth and fiction, and invite readers into a reflective dialogue. This constructedness is especially evident in the novel's play with form, as it contains letters, theoretical reflections, confessions, literary criticism, and personal experiences all folded into the form of a novel. This formal diversity could invoke more suspicion and skepticism toward the novel, where the reader is caught in a continuous tension between believing and doubting.

Moreover, one can say that Kraus does not simply aim to reverse the binary of public/private; instead, she creates a literary and theoretical space where marginalized voices, particularly those of women, can engage in self-representation and collective dialogue. In other words, Kraus opens up the space where readers, especially women, can recognize and resonate with similar emotions and social conditions. Also, by writing personal experiences and making them public, Kraus invites other women to do the same with her call to universalize the personal, i.e., to turn their personal issues into public discourse. By writing an autofictional account of her private obsession with Dick and transitioning it into a discussion of public matters, Kraus deliberately disrupts the deeply gendered public/private binary, showing that the personal *is* political at its core.

Similarly, in *Dept. of Speculation*, Jenny Offill shows that the personal is indeed political by venturing into the intimate details of a failing, but persisting marriage, as well as addressing the realm of literary criticism by commenting on and performing the act of writing. Like Kraus, Offill builds her narrative around the life of a woman writer and the circumstances of her marriage, whose life closely mirrors Offill's: both Offill and the protagonist are writers, wives, and mothers. Offill's novel alternates between layers of personal experiences, introspective reflections, literary references, philosophical reveries, and scholarly quotations. The shifts in this fragmented structure are accompanied by a shift in the narrative perspective—from the highly involved first-person narrator to the third-person narrator as the protagonist's level of detachment increases. This comes in stark contrast to Kraus's shift from the third-person to the first-person narrator. This contrast with Kraus's narrative shifts illustrates, I have established, that autofiction is a spectrum, ranging from the intimately personal to the more subtle, implied connection to the author's life.

Moreover, while the protagonist in *Dept. of Speculation* navigates the different roles of a writer, a mother, and a wife, the fact that she is consistently called a “wife” throughout the novel indicates that being reduced to this single role is the central, problematic part of her life that she puts under investigation. Accordingly, both novels are works of autofiction but employ autofictional elements to different degrees. Nevertheless, both novels use autofiction as a means of reclaiming agency, as their female protagonists, and by extension their authors and women in general, assert control over their own stories.

In conclusion, the significance of autofiction needs to be highlighted as a genre that blurs the lines between fact and fiction, as well as between the private and the public, turning deeply personal experiences into public, collective narratives. By focusing on the female protagonists who are navigating societal expectations and experimenting with narrative form, these works reveal the gendered constraints imposed on identity and the transformative potential of literature authored by women.

Ultimately, works by women writers such as *I Love Dick* and *Dept. of Speculation* show how autofiction can move beyond the either/or logic of public and private, revealing systemic issues—gendered labor, emotional vulnerability, and cultural norms—historically relegated to the private sphere by patriarchy. What these texts demonstrate is that autofiction is not merely a stylistic experiment with form and content but a literary feminist strategy for challenging and rewriting the conventions of authorship and gendered constraints. By bringing private experiences into the public domain and politicizing the personal, such novels contest the boundaries of both public discourse and the novel form. In doing so, they show that literature can serve as both a mode of self-articulation and cultural intervention. In this sense, autofiction has a transformative potential: it destabilizes binaries and cultural norms, thus reclaiming women’s voices within a male-dominated literary and social landscape.

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