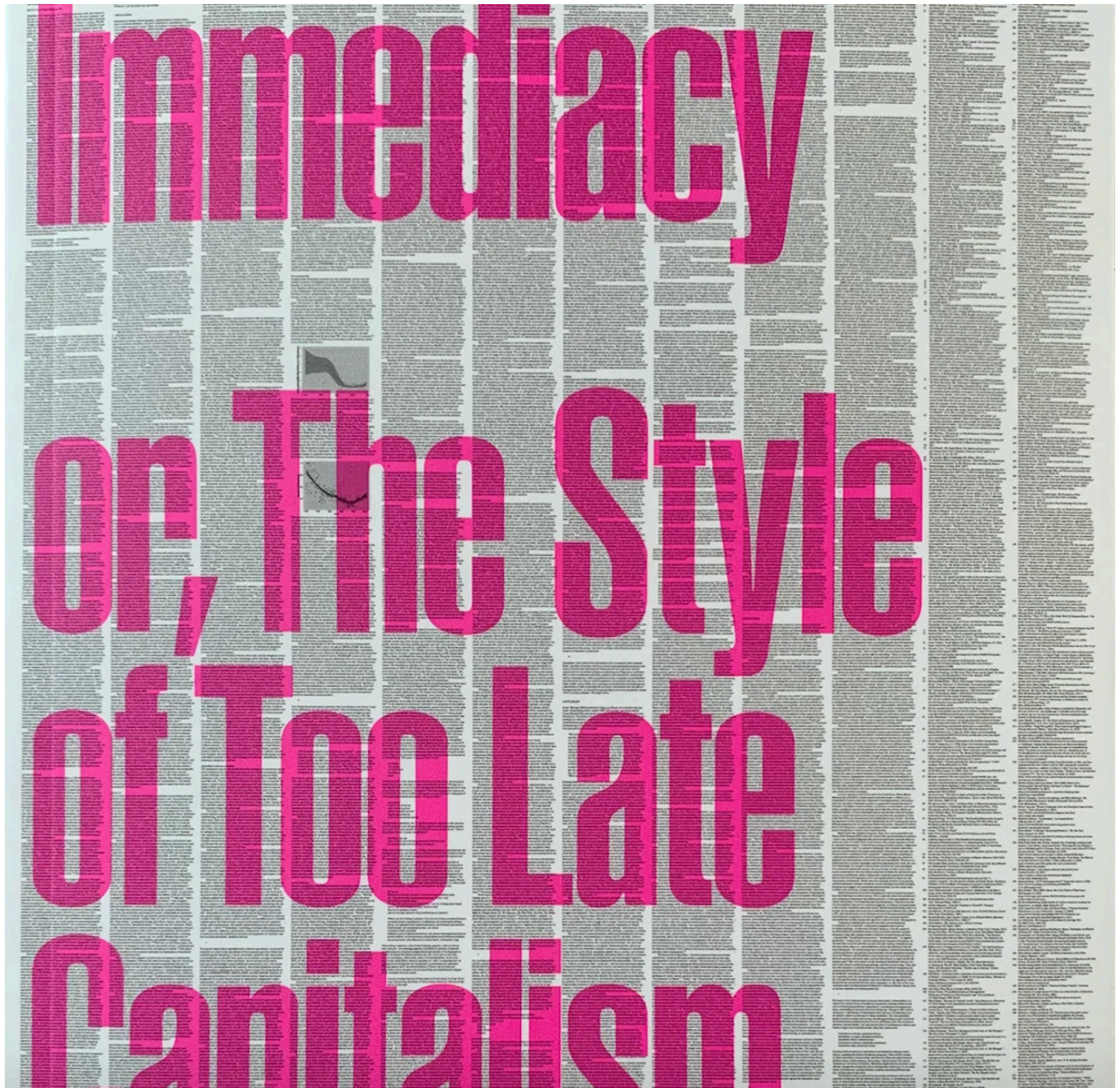


# Against Anti-theory

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Cover detail of Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (Verso, 2024).

*This is an adapted excerpt from Anna Kornbluh, Immediacy, or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism, out from Verso.*

On January 1, 2024, the best-selling author and motivational lifestyler Gabby Bernstein launched a New Year's "Manifesting Challenge": "If you think it, it will come." To "manifest" is to make evident, obvious, plain. For the self-help thought leaders and #manifest TikTokers who have popularized the term of late, this emanating is radically intransitive: no specific event transpires, only our innermost authentic selves flowing outward to a mirroring world. "Manifest effortlessly!" Google Trends shows a significant increase in this fluid emission in recent years, with sales figures and influencer follower counts to match. So why is manifesting so manifestly valuable now?

In the tradition of Marxist cultural theory, such value should be understood in connection with economic value. Whenever there is a style trend or ideological innovation with a broad grip, it bears some relation to shifts in the economy. Intransitivity, emanation, immanence—these are the spiritual guises of über-capitalist "flow," the frictionless, instantaneous, propulsive exchange that organizes twenty-first century circulation-intensity in the wake of stagnating production. For nearly fifty years now, in the G7 economies circulation has offered a compensatory source of growth: if you can't make new things, just exchange old things faster. "Disintermediation" is one industry term for this circulation intensification: cutting out the middleman to facilitate more fluid exchange. Imperatives for the fast, smooth, on-demand, and all-access govern a sweeping spate of twenty-first century commercial and social activities, from gig labor to self-publishing to e-brokerage. With this as the basis of current capital, it is no wonder that spiritual values, cultural logics, and aesthetic modes have come to promote doing away with mediation.

This style of expressly rejecting mediation can be seen in the loss of distinction between inner and outer that "manifesting" trademarks; in the breakdown of evidence into experience and the "alternative facts" / "do your own research" of personal epistemology; in the dismantling of public education and discrediting of expertise; in the intolerance for art in Hannah Gadsby's *Picasso*; and in the nausea for fictionality popularized by Karl Ove Knausgaard. Everywhere we look, mediation—the social activity of putting ideas into the medium of language or art; the social work of making meaning; the social processing of connective tissue—has been rendered illegitimate. Cultural forms like TV, art, music, and fashion should now be instant relay, one-dimensionally literal. Exchange guaranteed. To give a name to this style of disintermediation, instantaneity, self-identity, and manifestness—differentiating it from its predecessor, postmodernism—we can hazard "immediacy." Immediacy crushes mediation. It is what it is. Immersed without intermediary, #nofilter, ferment with "no words," immediacy is temporal presence, spatial intimacy, epistemic populism, and experiential intensity, all congealed into an aesthetics of apparency.

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Immediacy's sway in culture has evaded critical analysis in no small part because contemporary cultural theorists have so thoroughly succumbed to its intoxications. The vocation of theory to give us perspective on the production of ideas—on their historical conjuncture, their class interests, their philosophical deficiencies, their determined style—flounders in the current anti-idea immediatism. Contemporary theorists have overcorrected what they frame as the impersonal abstraction, masculinist reserve, and rationalist systematicity of capital-T theory, offering in its place obscene confessionalism, pseudo-lyrical fragmentation, flowing immanence, and tautological haecceity. These are of course our friends we're talking about, enchanting and righteous, but their abrogations of conceptuality and annulments of mediation have some objectionable effects.

Take the seven-hundred-page 2020 masterwork *Critique and Praxis*, by the Columbia law professor, Foucauldian theory expert, NPR talking head, and death-penalty lawyer Bernard Harcourt. Pronouncing that critique has become too divorced from praxis, Harcourt enjoins his fellow theorists not to collective action as praxis renewal, but to anti-representational emanation:

We critical theorists should no longer be speaking for others. The question "What is to be done?" must be reformulated today. Critical theory cannot speak for others. It must instead foster a space for everyone who shares the critical ambition to speak and be heard. The solution to the problem of speaking for others is not to silence anyone, but the opposite: to collaborate and cultivate spaces where all can be heard, especially those who are most affected by our crises today. This reflects as well a new writing style and grammar today. We no longer write in the third person, as Horkheimer did at midcentury. We do not write in universal form either, as Marx or Hegel did before that. Neither do we hide behind the passive tense. No, today, each and every one of us must write in the first person. And that means that we can no longer ask, passively, "What is to be done?" but must actively reformulate the very question of critical praxis for ourselves. For me, it becomes: "What more shall I do?"<sup>1</sup>

Existing modes of writing cannot work; theory is no longer tenable. Collective demands and objective courses of action do not hold; only the subjective and singular are appropriately moderate. The very project of representation—of presenting at some remove, of binding together more than individuals, of speaking for others—has been forsaken. If you thought praxis involved mediations meant to scale upward from the individual and buttress a mass—the face-to-face production of a "we," the narrative of where power lives and how we might want to live, the email reminder to participate in rallies, the phone bank script, the local op-ed, the concrete slogan around which many can unite—then *Critique and Praxis* is here to set you straight. That old notion of praxis owes too much to representation and synthesis and impersonality. In its place comes the salve: praxis extrudes "spaces where all can be heard," where voice resounds and perpetual presence bounds. Harcourt authorizes this revelation with a mantra from Bruno Latour, the contemporary prophet of critical realism, assemblage, and entanglement: "There, I've finished, now, if you wish, it is your turn to present yourself."<sup>2</sup>



Auto-emanation configures praxis as a “decentering” in which “universality is replaced by particularity: what is true now turns on personal self-interests” and as a retreat “from institutions to the personal” because “organizations are obstacles to organizing ourselves ... We need to turn inward to transform the self.”<sup>3</sup> Of course, it’s a relief to see a white man voluntarily decentering, and gratifying to clock the practical effects of venerable theories that audit the malfeasance of institutions and the harm of universals. As indeed Harcourt attests in a paragraph that immediately follows the block-quoted one above—where he goes on to cite Sara Ahmed, Fred Moten, Chantal Mouffe, and others<sup>4</sup>—deep traditions of feminist and Black epistemology and exploration underwrite the magnetic “I.”<sup>5</sup> In metabolizing the authentication of situated knowing, the elevation of personal experience, the suspicion of grand narratives, the transposition of politics into ethos, and the promotion of auto-ethnography across disciplines, Harcourt consummates his enterprise: to empty out the speculative, convocative, and generalizing dimensions of critique. He then arrives at rationalized auto-manifestation as the new *immediacy* style of theory—or rather, of anti-theory.

Anti-theory as immediacy’s content finds its signature form in “autotheory,” the explosively popular genre-busting lyric personalism that conglomerates professional theory with the privatizations of the publishing industry and the liquidations of the university. Maggie Nelson’s 2015 *The Argonauts*, both a National Book Critics Circle Award winner and *New York Times* bestseller, as well as the occasion for a MacArthur Genius grant, set a standard in proclaiming itself a “genre-bending memoir, a work of autotheory.”<sup>6</sup> *The Argonauts* offers a deeply exposing personal meditation about sex, embodiment, pregnancy, and transition, punctuated by frequent screeds against queer theory, gender theory, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies. Above all, it insists on manifesting what does not admit of conceptualization or figuration: “I am not interested in a hermeneutics, or an erotics, or a metaphysics, of my anus. I am interested in ass-fucking ... I don’t want to represent anything ... I am interested in offering up my experience.”<sup>7</sup> This intransitively evident self-identical experience is often portrayed in fragments and elliptical nonnarratives that thwart systematic elucidation. A charismatic persona, corporeal sensation, and affective flooding constitute the self-presentation Latour decrees. And as autotheory star Andrea Long Chu herself notes, the point of such a presentation is to unfurl an extensive series of discrete singularities, since concept-making and the disagreements that power it are off limits when the autotheorist “relies on her own vulnerability to insulate herself from close scrutiny.”<sup>8</sup> Argumentless intensity immured from dissent and devoid of higher-order integration—it feels good going down.

Revealingly, in an interview Nelson linked this anti-conceptual, anti-representational, anti-genre efflux to university labor configurations:

I’m always looking for terms that are not “memoir” ... and since this book has more theory in it than other books of mine, [“autotheory”] seemed an apt description ... I can teach most anything in the humanities I want; further, our MFA program was specifically founded on its lack of partition between so-called “critical” and “creative” writing ... While writing this book I taught a course called “Wild Theory” for my grad students, focused on theoretical writing that falls out of boundaries or disciplines, or even sense-making—that was a lot of fun.<sup>9</sup>

For Nelson, autotheory is the fun, free wilding in “lack of partition.” In *The Argonauts* she also calls this wilding “flow ... plethora ... kaleidoscopic shifting ... excess”—so many virtues of immediacy synonymized by her flexible labor. “I can teach most anything in the humanities I want” is at once a product of her position as a tenured full professor at a wealthy school and an inverted image of the generalism now demanded of most contingent humanities PhDs, who “fall out of boundaries or disciplines” as they cobble together employment. Nelson’s conjugation of auto-emanation with professional agility recalls the flexibility integral to circulation capitalism, and suggests a connection between autotheory’s meteoric rise and the deskilling of academic labor.

In the same period as systematic academic casualization, autotheory works have enjoyed high sales and rhapsodic acclaim. The institutional contraction of the waged production of theory unsurprisingly pressurizes the circulability of theory, driving its disseminations and vernacularizations, and its makeover as “relatable” genre bending. Everyone is a creative now. Autotheory is just as at home in open-access literary magazines, university press monographs, and fast-casual university press pamphlets (a burgeoning form—see the “Forerunners” series from University of Minnesota Press, for example) as it is in memes and performances, poetry and Reddits.<sup>10</sup> These circulations herald many good developments. But at the same time, they propel academic theory to empty out its own medium, to undo its own medial differences from commercial writing. It is good to make theory available. It is bad to portray the historical erosion of theory’s conditions of production, including the reproduction of the professional-intellectual class, as an endogenous style evolution of self-proclaimed “weak theory” and “amateur criticism.” Just as Nelson positions genre-bending as dexterity for the academic labor market, we can conclude of autotheory not only that it enkindles senior academics imagining eager readerships beyond the academy, but also that it ignites younger academics searching for openings in an economic and professional landscape of foreboding foreclosure. Its elasticity portends a space for young academics to create work and find recognition even though the university as a viable workplace has largely expelled them.

Autotheory is only one face of contemporary theory’s diminution and de-mediation. Its flair and market prowess should not overshadow the salience of immediacy in more conventional academic work that takes for its subject matter a highly moralized entanglement, immutability, and absolutism. These topics du jour and their Latourian episteme of distributed agency, attachment, pseudo-Indigenous complexity, and flow and blur share autotheory’s project of rescinding theoretical abstraction and immanentizing knowledge. Since we have considered instances from political theory and literary studies, perhaps a final example from a third discipline in between them, geography, can suffice for a different illustration of immediacy-style anti-theory’s combination of dematerialized immutability and algorithmic absolutization.

Kathryn Yusoff’s *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, from the “Forerunners” series, announces in its title its intention to void the concept of the Anthropocene: either it must mean something inestimably diffuse, or it must mean nothing. In Yusoff’s view, the concept is illegitimate because it fails to incorporate eternally recurrent anti-Blackness. The concept of the Anthropocene

was created in 1980 by an international consortium of scientists to find a way to designate that the earth's material composition is being altered by contingent human activity—specifically, the extraction and burning of fossil fuels by the ruling class. Yusoff rejects the coherence of the “Anthropocene” as a false division in what is really uninterrupted destruction since the dawn of time. “The Anthropocene is not reducible to anthropogenic climate change or to a carbon or capitalist imaginary” she writes, diffusing the geological measure into a metaphysical measure of eternal anti-Blackness.<sup>11</sup> Beyond this repudiation of the historical content of the Anthropocene, Yusoff also indicts its form; the very project of concept-making and “description of the world” is discredited, she argues, by its resemblance to “property” and “captivity.”<sup>12</sup> By repeatedly assimilating analytic distinction to violence, Yusoff replaces representation and conceptualization with the unrepresentable and irremediable. Refuse any historical specificity, technical content, or conceptual integrity to “the Anthropocene,” since it is always and everywhere. No distinction, no causality, no carbon, and thus no culpability; only the dematerialized ontology of billionite expanse. It is this absolutization, in all its algorithmic flat infinity, all its exculpation of the actually guilty, all its negation without contradiction, that instantiates immediacy as anti-theory style.

Do not speak for others. Do not represent anything. Do not proffer concepts. Quick-sanding all acts of knowing into immanent blur and charismatic presence, this immediate-ization of theory, like its siblings in art, literature, and TV, advances fluidity, immersion, expanse, and keepin' it real as footloose virtues unconstrained by the determinations of too-late capitalism. In this fervent obscuring of the conjuncture from which it emerges, contemporary anti-theory negates the centuries-old premise that theory examines the constraints on ideas posed by the material order of things—and then composes ideas anyway. Theory must not merely reify what is immediately given; it must introduce into the given constructions that mediate—that intercede, that sublate, that capacitate. The old world is dying, but the new world struggles to manifest. Maybe our material advice for these spiritual times, our modest theoretical flare for practice, is to try mediation.

Notes

1

Bernard E. Harcourt, *Critique and Praxis* (Columbia University Press, 2020), 17.

2

Harcourt, *Critique and Praxis*, 33.

3

Harcourt, *Critique and Praxis*, 237. The first part of the quote comes directly from the Invisible Committee's pamphlet *The Coming Insurrection* (Semiotext(e), 2009), while the inward-turn conclusion is Harcourt's.

4

Harcourt, *Critique and Praxis*, 17–18.

5

For this genealogy, see Kornbluh, “In Defense of Feminist Abstraction,” *Diacritics* 49, no. 2 (2021).

6

Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Graywolf Press, 2015), jacket copy.

7

Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 85.

8

Andrea Long Chu, “You’ve Heard This One Before,” *Vulture*, September 7, 2021 [→](#).

9

Maggie Nelson, “Riding the Blinds,” interview by Micah McCrary, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 26, 2015 [→](#).

10

Lauren Fournier celebrates autotheory’s “transmedial” quality, from “personal essay ... to feminist meme and performance for the camera,” which concords with the waning of medium. See Fournier’s *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (MIT Press, 2021), 2.

11

Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 40.

12

Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes*, 10.

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