

"Who gets to speak and why?": the poetics of  
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## **“Who gets to speak and why?": the poetics of oversharing in contemporary women's writing**

This article asks how oversharing, the revelation of “too much” personal information, functions as an experimental literary practice in contemporary North American women's writing. My argument follows two strands. First, I provide a brief history of oversharing as a cultural term and discuss how the label of oversharer is an “ideologically charged accusation” (Zimmer & Hoffman 2011, 181) that is primarily associated with women. Many critics argue that the identification and chastisement of internet users who share “too much” of themselves online reflects a wider discomfort with the increasingly blurred boundaries between web production and consumption, fiction and reality, and writers and readers in the digital age.<sup>i</sup> In the past decade, the development of social media has brought radical changes to interpersonal communication and this article focusses on an as-yet unexamined gender bias that underlies oversharing's popularity as a contemporary term of condemnation. Namely, I argue that women are more likely to be accused of oversharing than men no matter what the content of their self-disclosures and through brief analysis of popular texts by Lena Dunham, Emily Gould, and Sheila Heti, contend that many mainstream writers are derogatively labelled as literary oversharers by their reviewers and critics.

Rather than reject oversharing as a critical term, the second strand of this article turns away from the popularity of Dunham and Heti to ask whether experimental writing by women can embody a poetics of oversharing that is characterised by an excess of autobiographical, sexual, and embodied confessions.<sup>ii</sup> Through analysis of Chris Kraus' *I Love Dick* (1997), the final part of this article asks to what extent oversharing constitutes a mode of dissent in contemporary culture and, if so, whether oversharing can ever transgress patriarchal norms. Western feminist discourses have long asked whether the exchange of speech or writing can, to quote Judith Butler, “be the occasion for a disruption of the social ontology of positionality” (Butler 1995, 441-442). In 1976, Hélène Cixous famously called for an *écriture féminine* (Cixous 1976, 875) which would create a form of women's writing outside patriarchal discourse. However, five years later, Elaine Showalter criticised

Cixous' search for a "wild zone" (Showalter 1981, 200) of female expression, countering that the search for an *écriture féminine* was a "playful abstraction" (201) from the real job of feminist criticism, which might otherwise account for the "double-voiced discourse" that women are forced to embody within a patriarchy. This article intersects and updates debates about feminism's linguistic role, to ask whether oversharing confines women to disempowering modes of communication, what bell hooks describes as "a talk that was in itself a silence" (hooks 1988, 7), or whether it contains the means of a female and feminist liberation. Indeed, I argue that the female author's divulgence of an excess of personal information is, as Anna Watkins Fisher writes of Kraus' work, a fictional and "literary performance" (Watkins Fisher 2012, 224) that attempts to reverse "fears of women's dependence and emotionality as points of feminine weakness" (233). Kraus' experimental writing parodies the act of self-disclosure to a much greater extent than either Gould, Heti, or Dunham and, by doing so, this article reads Kraus' novel as a reclamation of the right to share whatever and, perhaps most importantly, however much the female subject desires.

### **The culture of oversharing**

Oversharing is a verb and the present participle of overshare. There is as yet no definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* but by deconstructing the term, we can reach a definition from its component parts. The *OED* cites "to share" as far back as 1552. The earliest form of the verb means to cut into pieces, which by 1600 comes to mean the individual's participation in an activity or feeling. To share means to perform, enjoy, or suffer something in common with others and, around the mid-seventeenth century, it becomes associated with giving something away. If we add "over" as a prefix, which in Old English means to exalt and by the fifteenth century means to master, to enlarge, or to recover from, it is possible to see how oversharing has the potential to carry both negative and positive connotations. Taken as an affirmative, oversharing means to master a participatory feeling: it is an almost transcendent act of performance, enjoyment, and/or suffering,

that is shared with or by others. Yet oversharing can also be understood as an act of self-immolation, the cutting of oneself into parts followed by the distribution of these pieces as a grant or gift to others.

Overshare became popular as a slang word in the late-1990s, when teenagers used the term as both a noun and a verb to describe a personal disclosure made in person. Many popular films and TV shows of the period reflect the term's popularity. In a 1997 episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, one character uses overshare as a verb to make fun of her taciturn boyfriend: "If you haven't noticed, he's not exactly one to overshare" (Green 1997). Similarly, in the cheerleading comedy *Bring It On* (2000), a character uses overshare as a noun, referring to an excessive *piece* of information rather than a process or practice: "I didn't need to hear that – that's an overshare" (Reed 2000). Until the advent of social media in the late 2000s, the overshare was more commonly used as a noun that denoted a particular moment of indiscretion rather than a widespread social practice. The meaning of overshare began to change, however, at the beginning of the twenty-first century when journalists caught on to the term's popularity amongst teenagers and noted an increased presence of the overshare in adult conversation. In 2000, columnist Bob Morris wrote the first of many articles to detail the rise of oversharing in the *New York Times*:

Overshare isn't just a noun, it's also an accusation (a way of calling "Foul!") in a culture in which people don't know how to put the brakes on. It's [American singer] Carnie Wilson in *Us Weekly* discussing the stomach and intestinal surgery that cut her weight by 150 pounds, adding that after having her "tummy tucked and boobs lifted" she's going to have sex all the time. It's unsolicited lectures from friends on colonics. [...] It's Kathleen Turner nude in *The Graduate* in London, and anything about *The Vagina Monologues*. (Morris 'Don't Spill It on Me' 2000)

Morris' column evokes nostalgia for an unspecified time when people kept their mouths shut and their bodies covered. Importantly, he links a rise in the overshare to what Morris describes elsewhere as "this moment of pervasive reality TV and voyeuristic talk shows" (Morris 'I Should Not Be a Camera' 2000). Of similar importance is the article's emphasis on the information sharing practices of women. Though Morris' examples are not solely female, his expression of shock at the

naked bodies and plastic surgeries of famous women reflects how Western culture expects the upkeep of female beauty to remain hidden, even if they uphold socially imposed standards of beauty. Morris stops short of suggesting that the act of disclosing “too much” information is endemic in contemporary culture, but he is the one of the first to describe the overshare as a cultural phenomenon, indicative of a craze for reality television and symptom of a late postmodernist culture in which, he writes, “people don’t know how to put the brakes on.”

Over the past decade, as social media has produced new and increasingly wide-reaching ways to share the details of our everyday experience and milestone life events, oversharing has increased in popularity as a cultural term. Indeed, the rise of oversharing in its twenty-first century context is indivisible from the implementation of “Web 2.0” (O’Reilly 2009) in the late 1990s and the subsequent development of websites that privilege user-generated content. The Internet was an initially passive form with few content creators; as Balachander Krishnamurthy and Graham Cormode suggest, the structure of “Web 1.0” was such that the “vast majority of users [were] simply acting as consumers of content” (Krishnamurthy and Cormode 2008). Moreover, the passive consumption of “Web 1.0” echoed previous developments in twentieth-century technology: Theodor Adorno famously denounced television for the psychological mechanism by which social actors “become blind and passive victims” (Adorno 1954, 176) and Mark Crispin Miller similarly argued that the “spectatorial” experience of TV is “passive, mesmeric, indiscriminating, and therefore not conducive to the refinement of critical faculties” (Miller 1988, 6). What is unique about the experience of Web 2.0 and the technological advances that enabled social media is a participatory ethos. Suddenly, as sociologist Ben Agger contends, Internet “[r]eaders become writers”, to such an extent that websites prioritising user-driven content can be considered “literary vehicles” (Agger 2012, 22) which emphasise interaction, participation, and collaboration between billions of potential co-authors and readers.

The rise of social media and oversharing are, then, interlinked.<sup>iii</sup> Webster’s *New World College Dictionary* made overshare their ‘Word of the Year’ in 2008; *Chambers Dictionary* did the

same in 2014. Both announcements followed a dramatic rise in the number of people able to use social media. Originally conceived as a networking site for Ivy League students, Facebook changed its user agreement in 2006 so that anyone over the age of thirteen could join; micro-blogging site Twitter was launched in the same year. Both dictionaries therefore define oversharing as the act of divulging “inappropriate” amounts of personal information online. According to Webster’s:

*overshare* is a new word for an old habit made astonishingly easy by modern technology. It is yet another product of digital advances that allow people to record and transmit their lives—in words, videos, and graphics—to anyone with Internet access, friend or foe.  
(Fontaine 2008)

Tellingly, critics emphasise the idea that any “friend or foe” can access the personal data that users post via social media and accusations of oversharing are infused with a paternalism that warns the Internet users against revealing “too much” of themselves in public. This paternalism is a direct result of the mechanisms of the most popular social media platforms: sites like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram allow and encourage users to reveal personal details to their online “friends” or “followers” through photo uploads, location trackers, and, most importantly, status updates. In *Oversharing: Presentations of Self in the Digital Age* (2012), Ben Agger criticises the “phenomenon” of oversharing for turning these otherwise “terrific literary vehicles” into sites of “banal chatter” (2012, xii). Agger speculates that users of social media “share more of their inner feelings, opinions and sexuality than they would in person” (2012, x) because the sharer cannot see the faces and immediate reactions of their audience. Similarly, literary critic Brian Boyd, who is widely known for his writing on evolution and cognition, claims that social media inhibits the conversational tells which evolved to keep self-disclosure in check. “Ordinarily,” he says, “in a social context, we get feedback from other people. They might roll their eyes to indicate they don’t want to hear so much about us. But online, you don’t have that” (Boyd 2013). Indeed, when a sharer posts an item online, its comments or “likes” will only reveal who directly responds to them; the sharer cannot know how many of their “friends” or “followers” read the post. Communications theorists Michael Zimmer and Anthony Hoffman call this aspect of online existence “diminished obscurity” (2011, 176) and state

that, prior to social media, the individual maintained some semblance of privacy because personal data was more difficult to collate. The voluntary and often habitual sharing of personal information online therefore threatens traditional, if socially constructed, divides between the individual's public and private lives and highlights the threat to "contextual integrity" (Zimmer & Hoffman 2011, 178) that the Internet represents to its critics.

Today, oversharing is shorthand for a kind of narcissism and moral decay associated with the rise of social media. Articles diagnosing the contemporary "culture" of oversharing proliferate in Western publications. Since 2000, the *New York Times* has published 177 articles that reference oversharing; since 2005, the *Washington Post* has published 239; and between June and December 2015, in only six months, *The Guardian* printed the term 741 times. Although the content of each article differs dramatically, the derogatory tone remains constant. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, oversharing is common parlance for what Zimmer and Hoffman define as "the divulgence of information excessive or inappropriate to a given context" (Zimmer and Hoffman 2011, 180). The idea of "excessive" information sharing is important here. In a typical example, British journalist Zoe Williams disparages oversharing as "an American term for giving too much personal information - it derives from the enjoinder in therapy to "share one's feelings"" (Williams 2003). Similarly, US journalist Elizabeth Bernstein suggests "Blabbing Your Business" is on the increase "thanks to reality TV and social media sites, where it's perfectly normal for people to share every single detail of their lives, no matter how mundane or personal" (Bernstein 2013). Yet there is no common definition of what kinds of information constitute an overshare and each article that diagnoses oversharing as a contemporary social problem names wildly different examples. Indeed, I suspect that the receiver alone defines the overshare; that their boundaries dictate their reaction to a disclosure and these boundaries alter depending on their relationship with the sharer and the context of the sharing. That is, one person will receive criticism for sharing details of their sex life or bodily functions, another for stories about parenthood, childbirth, or childcare. Perhaps most surprisingly the mundane, as Bernstein writes, is a key trigger and people

who use social media as a record of their daily routine receive the most accusations. One study, led by psychologist S. A. Rains, suggests that “superficial disclosures” (Rains et al. 2011, 6) are a major factor in denigrating the quality of online friendships. If a friend shares a lot of “trivial” information on Facebook or Twitter, which Rains denotes as traditionally domestic realms like food, shopping, savings, and home furnishings, then the quality of their friendship will often deteriorate.<sup>iv</sup>

Yet, it is more interesting to analyse oversharing’s use as a term of condemnation than to speculate whether online environments encourage and increase instances of oversharing. The negativity surrounding the term seems to be part of a wider attempt in Western culture to resolve some of the challenges that Internet-based communication systems present: not least the collapse of traditional divisions between private and public, offline and online, and reality and virtuality. Media theorist Russell W. Belk argues that online environments have a “disinhibition effect” (Belk 2013, 484), which leads many users “to conclude that they are able to express their “true self” better online than they ever could in face-to-face contexts” (484).<sup>v</sup> Perhaps, then, if the Internet does increase the likelihood of personal indiscretion, it is because users gravitate to online platforms in order to share, explore, and expand on what they believe to be their “true” selves with relative anonymity. Accusations of oversharing run contrary to that desire, chastising those who share “too much” of themselves when they share *any* kind of information, be that sexual, bodily, or mundane, that falls outside societal and often, as this article argues, patriarchal norms. To label an expression an overshare and a person an oversharer is an effort to re-establish a context, to refocus the blurred lines of real and virtual identities, and posit the offending expression as inappropriate. It is an effort to normalize information sharing practices, particularly those conducted online, by assigning a label to modes of expression that are deemed to be excessive or somehow outside the norm. “What is this compulsion to share?” writes journalist Roger Cohen, “there is a new urge to behave as if life were some global high-school reunion at which everyone has taken some horrific tell-all drug” (Cohen 2012). Yet, as I argue here, it is a mistake to frame the “urge” to disclose personal information as a new compulsion, even if the ways by which we share rapidly evolve.



## The gendered poetics of oversharing



Figure 1: 'Thanks for not sharing', *The Wall Street Journal* (Source: Getty Images)

Figure 2: 'Why do people overshare online?' *BBC online* (Source: Thinkstock)

To state my point clearly, women are accused of oversharing more often than men.<sup>vi</sup> On a superficial level, every article diagnosing our “culture” of oversharing features a photo of a woman chatting or typing recklessly to a friend or disinterested male partner (see figures 1 and 2). Just glancing over these pieces, published in the last few years by the *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Daily Mail*, demonstrates that while oversharing is a new word, contemporary use of the term is steeped in all too familiar misogynies that privilege male subjectivity over female and characterise female self-knowledge, and the public sharing of that knowledge, as transgressive. When we consider what oversharing is, the disclosure of personal information inappropriate to a given context, it is a term loaded against women who do not set the cultural context in which their disclosures are shared, received, and judged. In an extensive analysis of just one article on oversharing published in *Women’s Health* magazine, Jessica Butler suggests that criticisms of oversharing tend to centre on “traditionally female realms – children, food/cooking, the body, etc. – in a manner that upholds conservative ideals of femininity and disallows discussion of these arenas by suggesting that they are trivial and inconsequential” (Butler 2013, 14). Butler’s analysis recalls older arguments about women’s exclusion from the public sphere which, as historian Eileen Yeo argues, has “always been dangerous territory” for women “attempting self-representation” (Yeo 1998, 1). Accusations of oversharing voice a concern that online self-

disclosure diminishes the divide between private and public spheres but, to extend Yeo's point, the gendered dimensions of the accusation are rooted in the idea that women should not "share" some sense of public citizenship. The relativity of the term oversharing remains key here, as does the idea that oversharers do not share "too much" information: they share material that the accuser believes to be either offensive or mundane. Indeed, I would venture that women are more often identified as oversharers than men because patriarchal culture deems the very fabric of their existence, at best, to be uninteresting and, at worst, insignificant.

A telling example of this gender bias is the critical response to a recent strand of autobiographical writing practiced by Lena Dunham, Emily Gould, and Sheila Heti. Reviewers and journalists often describe these writers as authorial oversharers and, in doing so, characterise the trend as evidence of a general female tendency to give away "too much" personal detail. Again, accusations of literary oversharing are part of a much longer discussion. In 1973, Erica Jong claimed that male reviewers used confessional as "a put-down" to women writers: "It implies that what these women are doing is just sort of spilling out whatever they have in their guts and that there's no craft involved in the writing." (Jong 1973, 66). Similarly, Kate Millett took exception to the frequency with which male critics describe women's writing as "confessional", since it implies "the acceptance of sin, an unnatural, wrong action for which the writer wishes atonement" (Millett 1975, 74). Twenty-first-century women writers are the subject of similar accusations when they write about their emotional, sexual, and daily lives and, according to journalist Tyler Coates, oversharing is already a well-seasoned literary term, usually reserved, he writes, for "female writers, particularly those whose personal essays are [seen] as self-indulgent, navel-gazing screeds" (Coates 2013). Indeed, the term seems engineered to undermine the creative process of women's writing and to posit the work of women writers as the "spilling out" of content that Jong once associated with male definitions of confession. It is notable, then, that critics do not accuse male writers of oversharing with

the same regularity and that contemporary novelists like Ben Lerner, Tao Lin, and Karl Ove Knausgård, who write similarly autofictional accounts of their inner lives, bodies, and sexuality, are celebrated as contemporary incarnations of Proust when their female equivalents are regularly dismissed as unworthy of literary note.

Lena Dunham is by far the best-known “literary oversharer” (Peck 2012) and first achieved notoriety in 2012 as writer, director, and star of the HBO TV series, *Girls* (2012-present). *Girls* exemplifies Dunham’s playfulness with fiction and autobiography: Dunham stars as the show’s twenty-four-year-old protagonist, Hannah Horvath, an aspiring writer and graduate of Dunham’s alma mater, Oberlin College. Since *Girls*’ debut, Dunham has been accused of “remorseless self-exposure” (Freeman 2014) and of “oversharing” (Stanley 2014) the details of her life in the fictional world of the show. Some critics bemoan the emotional excesses of Dunham’s characters; others dislike *Girls*’ stark and graphic sex scenes. *Time* magazine reviewed an early episode in which Hannah is asked to write about going “outside her comfort zone” (Persky 2013). She proceeds, in the reviewer’s words, “to snort coke, expose herself publicly, and let down her friends. Where’s the human dignity?” (Persky 2013). Indeed, critics accuse Dunham of oversharing in part because of similarities between the writer and her onscreen character but also because of Dunham’s willingness to appear naked in what literary critic Alan Jacobs calls “extremely graphic” and “disturbing” (2013, 33) sex scenes. Repeated exposure to images of Dunham’s naked body, which, as her character declares in *Girls*, “has always been thirteen lbs overweight” (Dunham 2012), further confirms Dunham’s status as the “Queen” (Silman 2014; Karni 2015) of oversharing because her body type, love handles, and two or three rolls of fat are so rarely seen on famous women. The lack of “dignity” that *Time* then observes in Dunham and her character, Hannah, is a result of the same blurred lines that generate accusations of oversharing. That is to say, Dunham’s portrayal of a fictionalised version of herself deliberately elides traditional categories of fiction and nonfiction while Dunham’s stated “compulsion” to “expose” (Dunham 2015) herself onscreen falls outside existing social norms of how a woman should speak, act, and look with “dignity”.

For many, Dunham also heads a generation of “millennial” women writers who share the details of their personal lives in a form of autofiction that is heavily influenced by blogging and social media. These fictions are often read as open diaries; according to literary critic Minna Proctor, their authors seem more like “pathological oversharers with a weakness for literature” (Proctor 2014) than “serious” authors with a literary vision. One such writer, the American critic, publisher, and novelist Emily Gould, has also been credited with popularising oversharing as a contemporary term. In May 2008, six months before *Webster’s* made oversharing their word of the year, the *New York Times* published ‘Exposed’, Gould’s lengthy essay on blogging, online existence, and life as a female writer. The article was one of the first to debate the cultural meaning of oversharing and Gould conceives the term positively, noting the “strangest and most pleasurable aspects of personal blogs is just how intensely personal they can be” (Gould 2008). The subjectivity of oversharing is key to Gould’s argument. “Some people”, she writes:

have always been more naturally inclined toward oversharing than others. Technology just enables us to overshare on a different scale. Long before I had a blog, I found ways to broadcast my thoughts — to gossip about myself, tell my own secrets, tell myself and others the ongoing story of my life. [...] The big difference between these youthful indiscretions and my more recent ones is that you can Google my more recent ones. (Gould 2008)

Gould’s essay both comments on and practices the act of oversharing. First, she recounts the thrill of sharing online and in person, admitting a love of receiving the personal disclosures of others. Second, the essay shares, and re-shares, the intimate details of her life: “I’m talking “specific details about someone’s S.T.D.’s” personal, “my infertility treatments” personal. There are nongynecological overshares, too: “My dog has cancer” overshares, “my abusive relationship” overshares.” (Gould 2008). Gould claims to love them all, though she doesn’t define oversharing as a new phenomenon but rather as a “First Amendment” right, inalienable and constitutional as an expression of every US citizen’s freedom of speech. By recapping and retelling current and previous indiscretions, ‘Exposed’ asserts Gould’s right to overshare, again and again, defining and pushing at the concept of oversharing in an unequivocal celebration of the term.

‘Exposed’ elicited more than 1,200 comments from *New York Times* readers, many of them dismissive of or disgusted by Gould’s prose.<sup>vii</sup> Indeed, the passion for oversharing that Gould explored in her blogging and nonfictional writing was so controversial that it marred reviews of her first novel, *Friendship* (2014), when it was published six years later. The influential *New York Times*’ reviewer Michiko Kakutani both chastised and defended Gould, describing her earlier online work as “often very irritating” (Kakutani 2014) but characterising *Friendship* as “keen-eyed” and more than the “simple spewing [...] of an obsessive oversharer.” Canadian playwright and novelist Sheila Heti received similarly mixed reviews for her autofictional novel, *How Should a Person Be?* when the American edition was published in 2012. Publicised under the provocative subtitle, a ‘Novel from Life,’ Heti’s debut focusses on a twenty-eight year old playwright named “Sheila” who spends her day-to-day existence asking questions about the nature of friendship, identity, and art. “I had spent so much time,” Sheila says in the novel, “trying to make the play I was writing – and my life, and my self – into an object of beauty. It was exhausting and all I knew” (Heti 2012, 13). Much like Dunham’s TV show, Heti’s novel features a protagonist who mines her personal life for artistic material. In *Girls*, Hannah falls out with the friends, boyfriends, and relatives she writes about; in *How Should a Person Be?*, Sheila argues with her best friend, Margaux, about Sheila’s lack of boundaries and, particularly, about the latter’s desire to tape their conversations and use transcripts in her writing. Consequently, reviewers characterise Heti’s novel as a symptom of the age of confession: “a reaction to the age of over-sharing” (Heti 2013), “a complicated twist on over-sharing” (McCormack 2012), and representative of art “in a time when over-sharing has become not only acceptable but expected” (Crum 2015).

Yet Heti’s narrative also “overshares” the intimate details of Sheila’s personal life. The text brims with references to her “dirty”, “slutty underwear” (Heti 2012, 58), to her literally “multicolored shit” (Heti 2012, 90), and detailed accounts of her sex life, including a narrative ‘Interlude for Fucking’ (Heti 2012, 117) in which Sheila repeatedly asks her partner to “cum in my mouth” and

“[d]on’t let me wash it out” (Heti 2012, 120). Dunham, Gould, and Heti all write about their protagonist’s sexual experiences, their bodies, desires, and fantasies; they do so repeatedly and incessantly, though they do not write as explicitly as their critics suppose. Indeed, novelist and critic Hannah Tennant-Moore counts Dunham and Heti within a “trend of young women portraying themselves through their mediocre sexual experiences” (Tennant-Moore 2014) and claims there is an innocence to their portrayals of sex and sexuality that could hardly be deemed explicit. Still, I argue that a common poetics links these authors, the art they create, and the art that their characters create within the text. Both Hannah and “Sheila” live with their “clothes off”, as Heti writes, and claim to disclose the private details of their lives “so the rest of us can know what it means to be human” (Heti 2012, 60). This is a lofty and somewhat naive ambition, but it is fundamental to the narrative of autofictional texts. *How Should A Person Be?* uses Heti’s life as material, relying on emails, transcripts, and the minute, even boring details of her “real” social life. These disclosures often seem to have no point, do little to advance the story, or enable characterisation but, despite the limitations of the narrative perspective occupied by Dunham, Heti, and Gould, who have been rightly criticised for the whiteness and straight-ness of their fiction’s world-view, narrowness seems rather to be the point. The everyday concerns of these writers are mundane and universal, everyday and explicit, but when articulated by contemporary North American women who write fictive and creative versions of themselves, they continue to transgress as critics diagnose their “navel-gazing screeds” (Coates 2013) as objects of ridicule and disgust.

### **I Love Dick**

It is interesting to note that the “new” trend of literary oversharing headed by Dunham, Gould, and Heti coincides with a revival of critical interest in experimental women writers of the late 1980s and 1990s. In her essay ‘How Soon Is Now: Constructing the Contemporary / Gendering the Experimental’ (2014), Rachel Carroll observes that the rise of second- and third-wave

feminist presses, “and their contribution to the construction of the canon of historic and contemporary women writers” (Carroll 2014, 8), has established an unprecedented audience for women’s writing. However, as Carroll also notes, the legacy of feminism’s “mainstream” cultural integration is littered with “problems and paradoxes” (Carroll 2014, 9) that have yet to be resolved. The exclusion of experimental women’s writing from mainstream publication is one such problem and is particularly telling of the ways in which Dunham, Gould, and Heti are categorised by their critics. That is, the sexual, bodily, and mundane indiscretions that make up the narrative dialogue and prose of *Girls*, ‘Exposed,’ and *How Should A Person Be?* are only radical within the narrow set of feminine ideals prescribed to twenty-first century women. Moreover, these texts are only experimental within the narrow range of women writers who achieve mainstream publication. Against the hostile climate of literary publishing, the poetics of oversharing outlined above is situated within a community of female writers who read, support, and publish other women. Dunham provided a blurb for *How Should A Person Be?*; Gould and Heti have appeared in conversation together and as part of roundtable discussions with their experimental foremothers, Lynne Tillman, Eileen Myles, and Chris Kraus. Importantly, Gould also established EmilyBooks in 2011, a project that “publishes, publicizes, and celebrates the best work of transgressive writers of the past, present and future” (Gould & Curry 2011), commissioning two original titles a year and republishing works by Renata Adler, Elena Ferrante, and Dodie Bellamy, amongst many others.

Together, Dunham, Heti, and Gould have also helped raise the profile of Kraus’ debut novel, *I Love Dick*, the first edition of which acquired cult status in the art world when it was published in 1997 but was largely bypassed by literary circles. In 2006, a new edition of *I Love Dick* was released, selling 1,000 copies a year until 2012 when, as Gould writes in her review of the British edition, “the zeitgeist began to catch up” (Gould 2015). Gould’s review links the “influence” of *I Love Dick* to the mainstream successes of Dunham and Heti and suggests that 2012 was a watershed moment for women’s writing, when “[p]op culture was celebrating art

made by or about “difficult” women” (Gould 2015). For her part, Kraus has also noted a sea-change in the reception of women’s writing: she praises Dunham in interviews, lauds EmilyBooks for its engagement with her generation of women writers, and wrote a lengthy review of *How Should A Person Be?* that compares Heti’s use of “constructed reality” (Kraus 2012) to her own autofictional style. In a 2014 essay for the *Sydney Review of Books*, Kraus considers her new-found, if still minor, popularity with a “new, largely female readership” (Kraus 2014). She suggests that a kind of grass roots, “ground up” feminism, made possible by the Internet and social media, enables contemporary women writers to bypass traditionally male-dominated routes to publication so that “the writer’s position and following” often outweighs the status of the imprint their work appears under. That is, while the Internet provides a venue for gendered accusations of oversharing, Kraus suggests that the same platforms enable women to form communities that share, discuss, and help create an autofictional literature that attends to the poetics of oversharing identified above.

Kraus had achieved minor success as an American artist and filmmaker when she published *I Love Dick* in 1997. The text tells the story of Kraus’ protagonist, “Chris Kraus”, and her romantic and sexual infatuation with “Dick”, who critics have widely identified as British cultural theorist Dick Hebdige. The novel is largely epistolary in form, told through the letters that Chris and her then-husband, the French poststructuralist and publisher “Sylvère Lotringer”, write and occasionally send to Dick. Soon after meeting at a dinner party intended to establish the two men as collaborators, Dick becomes Chris’ “Conceptual Fuck” (Kraus 2006, 21). She chooses to worship him as an object of desire and immerses herself in a “painful elemental state” (Kraus 2006, 27) of infatuation that ultimately facilitates a series of personal, literary, and critical revelations. Her letters to Dick are creative, confessional, and wide-ranging, referencing the theories of Giles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard, the art of Sophie Calle and Hannah Wilke, and the novels of Gustave Flaubert and Marcel Proust. Yet the main topic of the novel is always Kraus herself: her “real” life, career, and fading cultural status as the



“money-hustling hag” (Kraus 2006, 23) of a successful academic. *I Love Dick* is not, then, about Dick per se. The eponymous man is something of a Trojan horse, a false idol to whom the author directs the “overflow” of her “sexual chakra” (Kraus 2006, 130) and mounting feelings of abjection as both a female artist and a wife. Indeed, as Anna Watkins Fisher observes, Dick acts as a “blank patriarchal screen” (Watkins Fisher 2012, 226) onto whom Chris can project her desires and through whom the author dismantles her residual feelings of shame and humiliation as, over the course of the novel, she defines the terms of her intellectual and sexual embodiment.

On the surface, then, *I Love Dick* is a fairly conventional epistolary novel of marriage and infidelity, that sees Kraus abandon both husband and lover for intellectual self-actualisation. The first half of the book, titled ‘Scenes from a Marriage,’ is told in the third-person and takes the form of a diary; Chris and Sylvère’s letters to Dick are nestled within the diary form as ‘Exhibits,’ a word that both alludes to the artistic praxis of the author and frames the letters as a kind of legal proof.<sup>viii</sup> Particularly in their first letters, Chris and Sylvère stress the “reality” of the text. “Dear Dick,” Sylvère begins, “It must be the desert wind that went to our heads that night or maybe the desire to fictionalize life a little bit” (Kraus 2006, 26). By asking Sylvère to write first, Chris forces her own hand, overcoming any residual “embarrassment” (Kraus 2006, 25) at her lust for Dick by putting herself in “this weird position” (Kraus 2006, 26) where she is forced to reclaim the expression of her own desire. Chris’ first letter to Dick then describes feelings of dejection as a result of the position she occupies and has, to some extent, put herself in. Yet it also points to the restricted paradigms of female authorship, with Chris already doomed to write “The Dumb Cunt’s Tale” (Kraus 2006, 27) without an *écriture féminine* in which to do so. ‘Scenes from a Marriage’ documents Chris’ gradual realisation that she does not and perhaps cannot fit within the academic world Sylvère and Dick more comfortably inhabit. Because Chris “does not express herself in theoretical language, no one expects too much from her” (Kraus 2006, 3) and once she realizes

she will never be taken seriously as Sylvère's "Plus-One" (Kraus 2006, 116), Chris' collaboration with her husband comes to a dramatic end when she, abruptly, leaves him.

The novel's second half, 'Every Letter is a Love Letter,' is more experimental and, written largely in the first person, it recounts Chris' active pursuit of Dick. This is where "the project" (Kraus 2006, 43) of the novel becomes "real"; where Chris transforms her "Conceptual Fuck" (Kraus 2006, 27) into the physical reality of a one-night stand with Dick and a more sustained, fragmented, and tangential vocalization of her intellectual process. It is also most obviously where Kraus employs oversharing as an experimental literary practice. *I Love Dick* consists of over two hundred confessional letters, two phone calls, and "one miserable fax" (Kraus 2006, 73). Each attempted interaction contains a litany of inappropriately divulged information: sexual, bodily, and mundane. Chris recounts details of the sex acts she performs with her husband and then with Dick, described with characteristic hyperbole and humour: "We have sex 'til breathing feels like fucking" (Kraus 2006, 161). Chris also recounts elaborate fantasies about a life with Dick and makes detailed reference to her past, noting the abortions she had with Sylvère (Kraus 2006, 45) alongside symptoms of depression, anxiety, and Crohn's disease, which she pointedly describes as a "hysteria of the organs" (Kraus 2006, 85). These confessions are all addressed to Dick who, from the beginning of their acquaintance, objects to Chris' advances and the ways in which she expresses herself. As Watkins Fisher also argues, Chris' letters are a "brutally public practice in forced voyeurism" (Watkins Fisher 2012, 227) and the most obvious grounds on which Kraus "overshares" is Dick's continued rejection of their content. Common to all descriptions of the oversharer is the suggestion that their confessions are unwarranted and that the excess of information they offer about themselves threatens what Zimmer and Hoffman call the "contextual integrity" (Zimmer & Hoffman 2011, 178) of contemporary information sharing practices. In much the same way, Kraus' letters are insistent and repetitious, reprising and retelling the details of her stalled career, failing

marriage, and obsession with Dick long after the subject has expressed his discomfort with the project.

Important to the poetics of oversharing outlined here, *I Love Dick* is an autofictional novel, a style practiced by Dunham, Gould, and Heti that combines autobiography, fiction, and theory. Joan Hawkins calls this aspect of Kraus' work "theoretical fiction" (Hawkins 2006, 263); she claims that *I Love Dick* is not so much a novel but a text "in which theory becomes an intrinsic part of the "plot," a mover and shaker in the fictional universe created by the author". This aspect of Kraus' fiction is also neglected by critics, who tend to read the autobiographical above all else. Yet Kraus continually points to the fictionality of *I Love Dick* and the novel is deeply intertextual, with older novels of marital discord and infidelity its primary literary allusions. Both Chris and Sylvère directly reference and briefly embody the characters of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), a text that established adultery as one of the defining motifs of the modern novel, when they sign a letter as "Charles and Emma" (Kraus 2006, 88). The reference is at once a literary exercise, an ironic intertext, and a form of sexual role-play when Chris playfully notes that "sex with Charles did not replace Dick for Emma" (Kraus 2006, 113). Elsewhere, Chris refers to Dick as characters in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* (1911) and, most significantly, Henry James' *The Golden Bowl* (1904), a text that portrays similarly tangled marital relationships defined by adultery. These references speak to the strikingly traditional marriage plot at the centre of *I Love Dick*, but they also convey the literary sophistication of the novel's central characters who are, Chris claims, "among the five most well-read people they each knew" (Kraus 2006, 32). Indeed, *I Love Dick* is an auto- and metafictional play on the realist novel and when Chris and Sylvère become "Emma" and "Charles", they write themselves into a literary tradition where their "*Billets Doux*; *Billets Dick*" (Kraus 2006, 70) mark the text's linguistic play as well as its literariness.

Kraus' autofictional style also highlights the performative nature of personal information sharing. The lives and work of a number of women artists and academics are

interwoven with the plot of *I Love Dick*, situating Kraus within what Rachel Carroll describes as a lineage of marginalised artists who have “worked with their own lived experience as creative subject matter” (Carroll 2015, 11). The art and writing of Kathy Acker, Simone Weil, and Hannah Wilke provides Kraus with a space to reflect on the relationship between fame and femininity, the private and the public. Quoting Wilke, Chris asks fundamental questions about the position of female artists and their failure to produce enduring works of art: “*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?*” (Kraus 2006, 211, emphasis in the original). Kraus’ quotations establish precedence; her experience of marginality is not the outlier but the norm. They also give voice to what Chris asks tentatively, at first, but articulates with increasing intensity throughout *I Love Dick*: “Who gets to speak and why?” (Kraus 2006, 146). Indeed, Kraus asks this question in a number of different voices and personae, quoting and analysing the work of the writers and artists she admires and adopting alternate names, both real and fictional: “Chris”, “Emma”, the “Dumb Cunt” (Kraus 2006, 27), “The Wicked Witch of the East” (Kraus 2006, 90). The narrative voice of *I Love Dick* is, to quote Foucault, an “alter ego whose distance from the author varies throughout the text” (Foucault 1969, 215) and Kraus continually points to the multiplicity and fictionality of her constructed authorial self. In doing so, *I Love Dick* mobilises the act of confession as a challenge to the patriarchal abjection of women, nakedly presenting the double bind in which women’s artistry is seen as too “personal” and therefore insignificant. Kraus overshares the details of her own life whilst also documenting an alternate Western female tradition in which sharing personal information to the point of excess functions as an undervalued artistic and literary practice.

The complex negotiation of author and autobiography that occurs in *I Love Dick* continues throughout Kraus’ work, which largely defies generic boundaries and classifications.<sup>ix</sup> Amongst other works of non-fiction and criticism, Kraus has published four

autofictional novels, all of which cover similar narrative ground: a woman's frustrated art career, her childless and unhappy marriage, and her gradual exploration of intellectual ambition and sexual desire. In *I Love Dick* and its prequel, *Aliens and Anorexia* (2000), the artist protagonist is "Chris Kraus", though in *Torpor* (2007) she is "Sylvie" and in *Summer of Hate* (2014) she is "Catt".<sup>x</sup> As essayist Leslie Jamison notes:

[Kraus'] books return to the same dynamics over and over—romantic abjection, ambiguous and often frustrating intimacies, artistic devotion and ambition, social communion and alienation—in order to explore them in multiple and overlapping contexts: artistic, spiritual, domestic, private, public, historical, political, economic. (Jamison 2015)

To my mind, *I Love Dick* shares the details of Kraus' personal life, her sexual encounters, bodily ailments, and domestic routines in order to cross similar contextual boundaries. By revealing "too much" of herself, through a number of narrative personae and positions, Kraus saturates the novel with her own "reality" and, through her autofictional style, transforms an instance of "real" personal distress into a public work of art. Even as Kraus imbues female narrators with her own biographical details, she injects enough fiction to unsettle any reader's attempt to identify them as Chris Kraus proper. Just as "Dick" is neither Dick Hebdige nor, really, the subject of *I Love Dick*, so "Chris" is not Chris Kraus but a number of the contexts the author inhabits, the impressions she leaves, and the personal details she chooses to share. In her foreword to *I Love Dick*, poet Eileen Myles describes Kraus as a feminist pioneer, "marching boldly into self-abasement and self-advertisement" (Myles 2006, 13). But rather than write a memoir of "self-abasement" which would, in a sense, be "truer" than the events presented in her novel, Kraus translates her real-life obsession with Dick into fiction, writing a "Novel from Life" to borrow Heti's tagline, in which the text's fictionality continually reframes questions about the author and their authority, fiction and reality, and the creative difference between sharing and oversharing.

The relationship between Chris and Dick must be conceived in similar terms. When Chris and Dick finally sleep together, she tells him that their relationship is “eighty percent” (Kraus 2006, 163) fiction but asks Dick if that fantasy cannot be based in “something real [...] in empathy, in intuition”. Dick, however, sees Chris’ project as more criminal than creative. “[Y]ou project this shit all over me,” he responds, “you kidnap me, you stalk me, invade me with your games, and I don’t want it! I think you’re evil and psychotic!” (Kraus 2006, 163). Dick interprets Chris’ project as an affront to his life and “privacy” (Kraus 2006, 242). Despite the fact that he sleeps with her, Dick does not believe Chris’ letters are an exploration and projection of her selfhood but a product of a psychosis designed to humiliate him personally. The end of the novel reiterates Dick’s position. When ‘Dick Writes Back’, he sends two letters to Chris, one addressed to her and the other to Sylvère. Only Sylvère’s letter contains a formal response; Chris’ envelope contains a photocopy of Dick’s letter to her now-estranged husband, in which he repeatedly misspells her name and repeats his “discomfort” at “being the unwitting object ... of some bizarre game” (Kraus 2006, 260). “I do not share your conviction”, he writes to Sylvère, “that my right to privacy has to be sacrificed for the sake of [Chris’] talent” (Kraus 2006, 260). In so doing, Dick misses the point of the exercise: Chris’ letters were never meant to “share” anything with him, but rather to perform and even to parody the act of sharing itself. Throughout *I Love Dick*, in over two hundred letters, Chris meditates on her life and marriage, confesses her sexual fantasies, and documents her bodily functions. However, through the revelation of all this personal detail, she emerges as a writer and theorist with the confidence to claim she is “inventing a new genre” (Kraus 2006, 137). Dick’s dismissal of Chris and his refusal to respond to her personally reveals what she has suspected all along: that as long as she is married to a more successful “Plus-One” (Kraus 2006, 116) she will be conceived as Sylvère’s wife rather than an artist or writer in her own right. For Chris, the act of oversharing is therefore the act of writing herself into existence, of forcing a creative praxis

from the mundanity of her life, and reclaiming what she describes as an “active, public ‘I’” (Kraus 2014) that might speak beyond the personal to a female universal.<sup>xi</sup>

Most importantly, and as this article has argued, Kraus’ commitment to “oversharing” the routine abjections of her life in the mid-1990s anticipates the many ways in which women are interrogated and shamed for the online expression of their subjectivity. *I Love Dick* is composed of letters, phone calls, and a single fax and yet the novel critiques the ever present gender bias that deems male sharing to be the norm that female sharing transgresses. In our contemporary “culture” of oversharing, where social media supports and encourages online self-disclosure but provides little indication of the context in which each disclosure is received, women are often accused of oversharing by those who believe their self-representation represents a threat to the “contextual integrity” (Zimmer & Hoffman 2011, 178) that traditionally divided public and private spheres. What Leslie Jamison describes as Kraus’ “abiding obsession with context” (Jamison 2015) can be read as a critique of contemporary information sharing practices which define sharing as the norm and oversharing as the abnormal. As I have argued, *I Love Dick* examines the creative difference between sharing and oversharing and, through a number of narrative personae, Kraus performs the confessional equivalent of an informational striptease, performing and projecting a consistent lack of dignity, composure, and, above all, a refusal to withhold that which society deems to be inappropriate. The creative difference, then, between sharing and oversharing is ultimately defined by the sharer’s disregard for the receiver’s boundaries, for the highly subjective scale on which each individual decides when another has shared “too much.” And, in this way, Kraus’ text also suggests to the reader that oversharing can a politically powerful mode of expression, an experimental feminist praxis, and a minor act of resistance within a contemporary American culture that continues to repress the sexual, bodily, and everyday lives of its female subjects.

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<sup>i</sup> Oversharing is often conflated with the acronym TMI (Too Much Information), though the former's flexibility has proven to be more popular. I refer to the latter - and its suggestion that the sharer has given away "too much" of themselves - throughout.

<sup>ii</sup> While this article is concerned with "women's writing", I am aware that the authors prioritised are white, cis-gendered, and that all texts depict heterosexual relationships. The wider project that my thinking fits within addresses these issues at length but it is worth stating, if only briefly, that this article counts accusations of oversharing as part of society's attempts to place different hierarchical values on women's and men's roles in order to enforce gender categories and social stereotypes. Rather than refer to an essential experience of womanhood, my analysis of oversharing in women's writing reads gender in the light of Judith Butler's famous suggestion: that gender is "the discursive/cultural

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means" (Butler 1991, 7) by which our cultural ideas of "natural sex" are established as "a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts." For more on the problems of defining "women's writing", see Sally Robinson, *Engendering the Subject: Gender and Self-Representation in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 9-11; Margaret J. M. Ezell, 'Conclusion: Revelations and Re-visioning,' *Writing Women's Literary History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 161-166; Jaqueline Labbe, 'Defining 'Women's Writing'; or, Writing "The History,"' *The History of British Women's Writing, 1750-1830*, ed. Jaqueline Labbe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1-26.

<sup>iii</sup> As of 2015, Facebook's global monthly active users surpassed 1.44 billion; Twitter has more than 500 million users. For more on the rise of social media see Michael Mandiberg (ed), *The Social Media Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), Hana S. Noor Al-Deen and John Allen Hendricks (eds), *Social Media: Usage and Impact* (New York: Lexington Books, 2012), José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>iv</sup> See N. L. Collins, L. C. Miller, 'Self-disclosure and liking: A meta-analytic review,' *Psychological Bulletin* 116: 3 (1994), 457-475; L. M. Papp, J. Danielewicz, C. Cayemberg, "'Are we Facebook official?' Implications of dating partners' Facebook use and profiles for intimate relationship satisfaction,' *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 15 (2012), 85-90; L. R. Saslow, A. Muise, E. A. Impett, M. Dubin, 'Can you see how happy we are? Facebook images and relationship satisfaction,' *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 4: 4 (2014), 411-418.

<sup>v</sup> As Belk writes, "This does not mean that there is a fixed "true self" or that the self is anything other than a work in progress, but apparently self revelation can be therapeutic, at least with the aid of self-reflexive applications. Just as psychoanalysis was once disparaged as "the talking cure", we might see the self-care of blogging and engaging in social media and forum conversations as a form of self-therapy by talking things through" (Belk 2013, 484).

<sup>vi</sup> This article is the first to fully explore this idea, but not the first to mention it. Anthony Hoffman's unpublished Masters' thesis provides a critical discourse analysis of oversharing and briefly suggests

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that the term is gendered (Hoffman 2009, 71) whilst Jessica Butler's unpublished paper, 'Too Much Info? *Women's Health Magazine* on Oversharing in Social Media', elaborates the gendered dimensions of the term through critical discourse analysis. The idea has also been debated by a number of journalists: see Tyler Coates, 'Why Internet Oversharing Isn't Just xoJane's Problem,' *Flavorwire*, May 2, 2013, <http://flavorwire.com/388823/in-defense-of-mandy-stadtmitter-why-internet-oversharing-isnt-just-xojanes-problem>, Jen Doll, 'In Defense of Oversharing,' *The Wire*, May 7, 2013, <http://www.thewire.com/national/2013/05/undershare-vs-overshare/64971/>, Stassa Edwards, 'Enough 'oversharing': It's time to retire one of the media's favorite words,' *Salon*, July 17, 2014, [http://www.salon.com/2014/07/17/enough\\_oversharing\\_its\\_time\\_to\\_retire\\_one\\_of\\_medias\\_favorite\\_words/](http://www.salon.com/2014/07/17/enough_oversharing_its_time_to_retire_one_of_medias_favorite_words/),

<sup>vii</sup> The *New York Times* was forced to shut down the comments section to stop the torrent of abuse. For example, 'Richard Streiff' commented "Dear Emily, What a sorry little cyberworld you chose to live in. Do you have a real life as well? Or is this all you have? You are just a stupid little girl. Go watch the sun set and grow up!" while a commenter known as 'phil, 11935' simply wrote: "stop polluting, find another job [sic]."

<sup>viii</sup> An observation that is interesting in light of Hebdige's threats to sue Kraus, Lotringer, and Semiotext(e) when the novel was eventually published.

<sup>ix</sup> Kraus' novels are published through Semiotext(e)'s Native Agents imprint at MIT, a women's fiction series founded by Kraus in 1990 as an analogue to the French theories of subjectivity published by Lotringer at Semiotext(e). As Elizabeth Gumport states in an essay for *n+1*, "[w]hat united the Native Agents authors was the way their work combined elements of theory, fiction, and biography, explicitly refusing to identify absolutely with any single genre" (Gumport 2012). Native Agents has published fiction by Kathy Acker, Lynne Tillman, and Eileen Myles, amongst many others, but *I Love Dick* stands as the imprint's central and searing manifesto, an embodiment of the kind of writing that Kraus professed to love reading: women's writing told almost "entirely in the first person" (Kraus 1997).

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<sup>x</sup> Sylvère is alternately “Sylvère”, “Jerome”, and “Michele”; the couple’s rescue dog always Lily.

<sup>xi</sup> Since the publication of *I Love Dick*, Kraus has distanced herself from what she calls the “reckless wild I” (Kraus 2012) of her debut. In an interview with *Rhizome*, Kraus suggests that her use of the first-person came from inexperience as a writer: “When I wrote *I Love Dick*, I was a complete outsider, so it was a very reckless, wild I. Now that my work has been more widely circulated, to continue to write from that outsider position would be false.” (Kraus 2012). Still, the continued and increasing popularity of *I Love Dick* demonstrates the extent to which readers are attracted to Kraus’ “reckless” first-person; her subsequent novels haven’t replicated *I Love Dick*’s success.