

"Auto" Theory:

Toronto: Vtape,

March 29 - April 23, 2022

By Lauren Gabrielle

Fournier

Vtape

This exhibition brings together work that I made during lockdown, when I was back home on Treaty 4 lands in Regina, Saskatchewan. I had received a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellowship (2019-21) that gave me the opportunity to create work through a practice of "research creation," which means being able to translate artistic practice as "legitimate research." Having spent the past decade living, working, and studying in Vancouver and Toronto, as a graduate student, I had been away from my hometown of Regina, Saskatchewan for most of my adult life. In 2019, as I faced many endings in my personal life, I felt compelled to return to the prairies. Something unresolved there was pulling me back. Little did I know that what was intended to be a short visit - somewhere around three months - would become, in the face of the covid-19 pandemic, my being back with family for close to two years. Once I was back, I soon bought a car - almost a necessity in a place with flailing public transit and a lack of year-round bikeability.



When I was working on *Critical Booch* back in 2019 with Access Gallery in Vancouver, featuring commissions by Jessica B. Johns, Sha Agbayani, and Andrea Creamer, I came across an Instagram post by the Indigenous feminist account Decolonial Meme Queens. It was an apt, ironic meme about white settlers, featuring stock photos of white music-festival-attending “hippies” who were, predictably, culturally appropriating Indigenous cultures through fashion choices (think headdresses, tattoos of dream catchers, and other such cringe-worthy, culturally insensitive decisions): “When your kombucha SCOBY has millions of cultures but you don’t even have one.” The joke centered around kombucha SCOBY or Symbiotic Culture of Bacteria and Yeast, which does, scientifically speaking, have millions of “cultures” in the sense of bacteria cultures which then ferment a mixture of tea and sugar into a fizzy tonic. When the joke fizzled out, I was left with the sticky question: what existed in this lack of culture?

It was true that there seemed to be a *lack*, though to say someone “doesn’t have a culture” doesn’t seem exactly true, either. My sister and I recently talked for the first time about how we were raised without any living *relationship* to our culture. We were told we were “Ukrainian and French,” as quick shorthand by our parents who also didn’t really have a sense of their culture. I’d later learn, from conversations with great aunts and grandparents, that culturally speaking we were



largely Eastern European (Romania, Czech/former Bohemia, Ukraine, Hungary) and Turkish, on one side, Spanish, French, and Scottish on the other. All these countries of origin, with their own cultural traditions and practices, tied to food/fermentation, music/dance, ritual, clothing, philosophy, ideology, *history* – rejected, it seemed, in favour of assimilating to a dominant Anglo culture of the prairies of so-called Canada. I wish I could have a conversation with my ancestors, to better understand their lived experience, their reasons for coming here. Did they understand what they were doing, as settlers?

Did that choice align with their values? What constitutes white-settler culture? How can I approach this culture from the perspective of a critical settler committed to decolonial work? Is such a thing even possible? Can settlers living on colonized land in good faith call themselves decolonial? All these questions I brought with me, as I settled in to observe, write, and start to make moving image works.

When I returned to the prairies and drove around, most often alone, in my car, I had a yearning to better understand the culture from which I came. This yearning was tied to my work as a researcher and writer, yes, wanting to be able to articulate my “culture” since I am so often working from an autobiographical place; but this yearning was also tied, more basically, to my existence as a person in the world.

If I am working with autotheory – the bridging of autobiography, memoir, and other subjective or embodied modes with theory, philosophy, citation – then I better have a sense of who I am, right? I had been starting to take more seriously my class background and how it shaped my experience in the world of academia and the arts, as someone who now held a PhD but who came from a low-income, “uneducated” background. A few things I knew were that the culture I was raised in was largely decontextualized-from-history, and its sense of identity and community came from religion.

I knew car culture was part of my upbringing, too. Someone once told me that Regina reminds them of Los Angeles, a comparison I found baffling until I returned again and noticed the similarities between the two cities: the sprawling suburbs, the strip malls, the highways. Some of my earliest memories are driving in the car with my dad, who loved classic cars, listening to George Michael’s *Faith* on a cassette tape. Cars and trucks symbolize a certain form of masculinity, and men have long given cars female names (thankfully, my dad is an exception, *queering* his approach to cars himself). After a decade as a pedestrian/cyclist/transit rider, I am now driving a car, as a queer woman who is hopeful about positive change for the future – social justice, sustainability – while feeling guilt about the gas my car is now guzzling. Bored during the pandemic, I would punctuate my days of



teaching online and trying to do workouts in my parents' basement, with a drive around the city. I'd then sit in a parking lot, with my imagination. In the so-called "vacant" space of a parking lot, I'd both ground and untether myself to the knowledges and truths that I "knew" as part of a process of unlearning and opening up to unknowing. Certain images came to me when I'd close my eyes, including a recurring image of an old white car spinning in an abandoned lot in central Regina, doing donuts – which means making the car spin in tight circles – for an audience of no one.

Each of the works in this exhibition are site-responsive, made on the lands of Treaty 4, in Regina, Saskatchewan, the territories of the nêhiyawak (Cree), Anihšīnāpēk (Saulteaux), Dakota, Lakota, and Nakoda, as well as the homeland of the Métis/Michif Nation. The land of these prairies is a constant presence in these works, even if it is cemented over by a suburban parking lot – it is still humming below. The prairies are contradictory – the landscape freeing and determining. The expansive sky yawning above my head reminds me of my smallness in the grand scheme of things, while making me also feel, at times, that I'm the only person around. The winters are long and the soil resists the colonial grip of farming – as my settler ancestors, escaping conditions like Holodomor in the Ukraine (or the Soviet-inflicted terror famine), would soon learn, as they worked to cultivate Indigenous lands that were not conducive to



agricultural cultivation, possibly realizing they were both unwitting pawns of the Canadian Crown – their Eastern European bodies described in animalistic ways by the English, who assumed they, of all people, could farm here, because of their “beast-like” bodies, as colonial correspondence put it – complicit actors in an imperialistic, colonizing, and even genocidal project.

I started from a place of making these works through an auto-theoretical practice that engages my autobiography and self alongside research and critique. Autotheory becomes an “auto” theory, where I look to car culture as a way of understanding the politics and aesthetics of a certain place and time.

In *Whipping a Shitty: Or, Idling (Donuts 1 and 2)*, a diptych of a car spinning its wheels in a parking lot becomes a reflection for idling – whether this is being idle in the sense of wasting time, spinning one’s wheels and not getting anywhere, or in the sense of what activists from the prairie provinces of Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Manitoba meant when they called on the Canadian government ten years ago now to “Idle No More” (2012) when it comes to Indigenous land rights. The movement was founded by three Indigenous women (Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam, Nina Wilson) and one white settler ally (Sheelah McLean).

The process of making this work was itself part of an auto-theoretical and auto-ethnographic practice:

I spent months trying to cast an “auto” or car performer to do the donuts, making use of informal social networks like the Regina Car Cruises page

on Facebook. The illegality of doing donuts in parking lots, especially if those parking lots are private (as most if not all are) made it even more difficult, and I soon learned, after pushback, that I’d have to do the casting in a more discrete way. I eventually came to the art community, which was a worthwhile decision, and the artist-curator Amber Phelps-Bondaroff in one of the last trips in her soon-to-be-retired old car, performed it in the vacant parking lots behind what used to be the Sears Bargain Center in the Value Mall – a place I visited countless times growing up, from childhood Sears trips through to my years perusing Value Village and the bargain book store as a young adult.

As I made this work, I would also learn about the terminology: that the reverse of a “donut,” the car motion commonly spun by teenagers and other bored rebels in suburban parking lots in the prairies, is not doing a donut but “whipping a shitty.” Thinking about whipping shittys [sic] makes me think of what constitutes “shittyness,” from an aesthetic standpoint of “trash” culture, as well as from an ethical or political standpoint of poor or bad behaviour. I remember the time my sister came home from school and she told me a girl in her class called her white trash. I wondered if the girl, who to preteen me seemed more white trash than us, was seeing herself in an other like her, hating her “culture” or lack thereof back.

I soon found that in order to wrestle with the ambiguity, uncertainty, and strangeness of what I was seeing around me, I needed to try out



other aesthetic strategies – like para-fiction, or the presentation of fiction as fact. This led to my first para-fictional work, *The Truck Guys*. In it, I perform as a beta-male in a young woman's body, a know-it-all conspiracy theorist who sits in her car in suburban parking lots, convinced that a secret cabal of pick-up truck drivers are behind all the world's ills. I then connect to a former "Truck Guy," a former member of this cabal who somehow escaped and is now living in hiding, and who remains anonymous and disguised in the video. Now her inside man, he provides the narrator/conspiracy theorist with intel, but also has his limits. I was never someone who was interested in conspiracy theories or in working para-fictionally, before, but ended up pursuing both for this work, as these were the strategies that seemed to be necessary to respond to and reflect what I was picking up on around me.

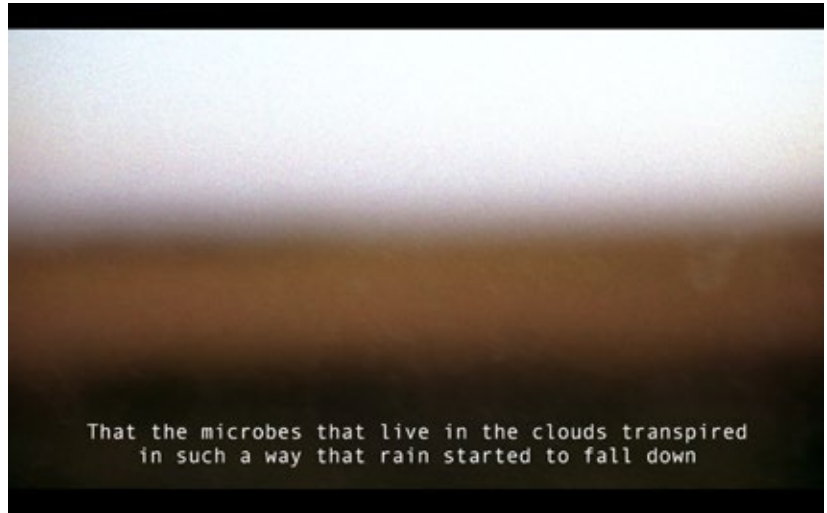
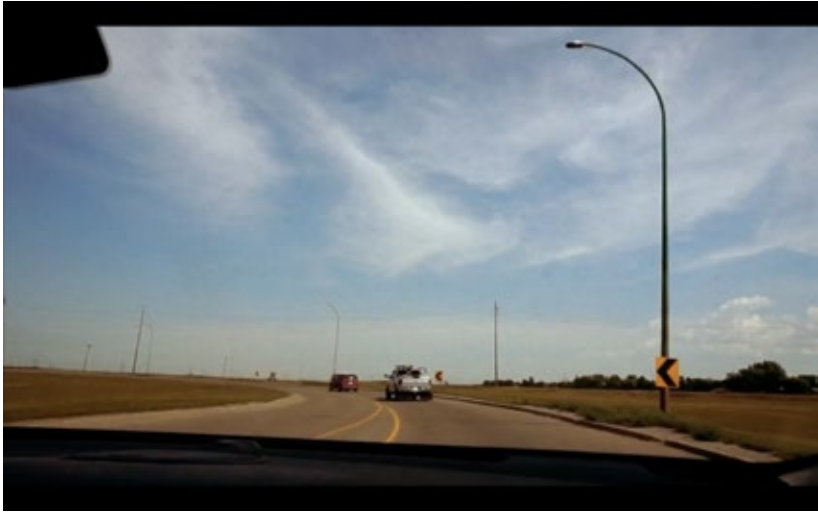
The Truck Guys began as an anatomy of a conspiracy theory. I made this work back in 2020, before any formal organization like the Truck Convoy had began (2022), though I'm sure I was tapping into the sense of anger and disenfranchisement that I could see around me in Regina. In the earliest days of the pandemic, I drove past a rusty pick-up truck with vinyl decals of hands giving the middle finger that read "F*CK COVID" on both the driver's and the passenger's side windows, and a larger "F*CK TRUDEAU" vinyl banner on the back. I had seen a number of the "F*CK TRUDEAU" vinyls over the years there, knowing not only from

these decals on cars and trucks, but also from conversations overheard at gyms and bars, that a lot of people here held strong to their hatred of Trudeau and the Liberals – men being the most outspoken. They were so consistently angry and fixated on him that I started to wonder if it was only economic disenfranchisement and oil (you know Trudeau isn't against oil, right? I'd say, but they didn't believe me), or if they had some homoerotic longing that only angered them more.

I started the work as a commentary on the "post-truth"/"post-fact" moment, and became, as I was making it, an allegory for white supremacy and racist xenophobia as they persist in places like Saskatchewan (as well as across Canada). Such racist paranoia manifests as surveillance, hate crimes, driven by Islamophobia, anti-Black, and anti-Indigenous racisms.

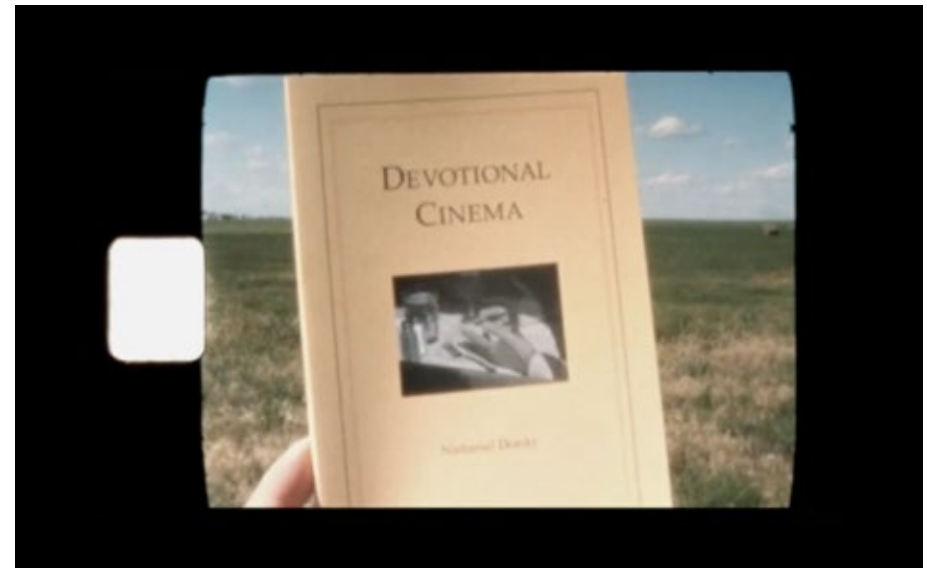
Today, the stakes of para-fiction are different than they were a few decades ago. In an age where it is no longer clear who is the "alternative" or the "counterculture" and who is the "status quo," as far as belief systems and ideology goes, playing with art forms that deliberately present fiction as fact has certain dangers and risks. Hence, the importance, I think, of contextualizing *The Truck Guys* here. We are living amidst the discourse of "post-truth," "post-fact," "fake news," and "deep fakes." Who are the radicals? One of the funny and eerie coincidences that took place when I was





improvisationally making *The Truck Guys* was the recurrence of the same pick-up truck with the vanity plate "R. Toad." Was the driver of this truck familiar with the surrealist artist Antonin Artaud, the father of the Theatre of Cruelty – an art movement from the early 20th century which sought organized anarchy and sensory disruption through theatre.

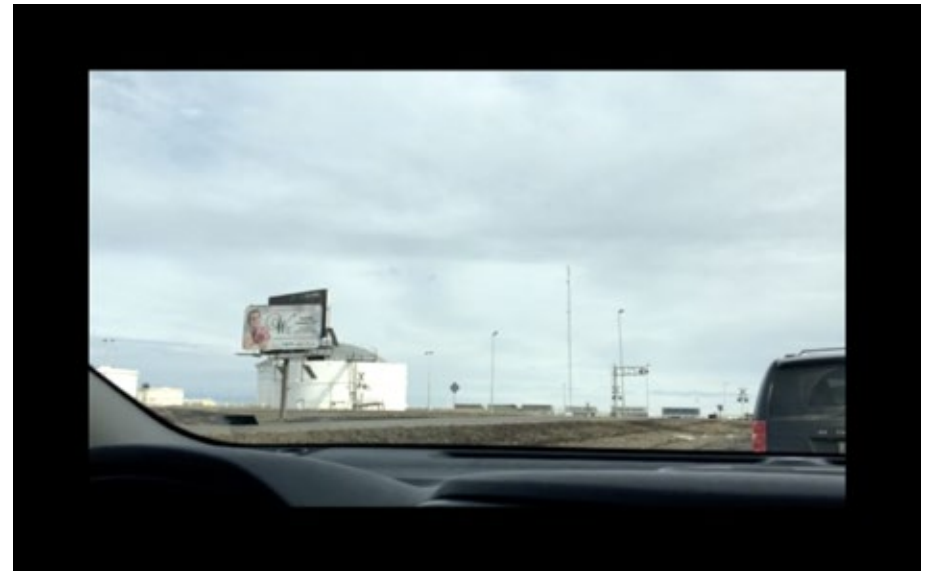
Hay Bale Devotion is a road trip film. I was going through an intense period of grief and upheaval in my life, as I drove north to the wedding of friends John G. Hampton and Amber Christensen, officiated by Elder Betty McKenna (Anishinabe from Shoal River band), which I, despite my emotional state, did not want to miss. I was driving along the Louis Riel highway for hours, a road named for the famous Metis rebellion leader whom Sir John A Macdonald had killed. I think about the road trip genre as one of *moving through*: here I am moving through a land with a great deal of history (an understatement); I am moving through personal grief and a sense of the collective grief that I tap into as I live on these lands as a white settler after the fact of colonialization and Indigenous genocide, and ongoing colonialization. This piece is a sketch, a trace of my embodied exploring as I tried my best to move through the grief I was experiencing at the time. Sometimes sadness and anger reaches a peak, and can only be let out with laughter, silliness, self-deprecation – my own coping mechanisms. Coming along for the ride was a book



I was reading, as nourishment: experimental filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky's *Devotional Cinema*. During stretching breaks, I get a coffee, read bits of the book, and look out at the hay bales – what I used to excitedly call as a kid, on family road trips, “straw donuts.”

In *Waiting for a Train to Pass*, made just a month before the pandemic would start and change our lives forever, I sit in the car with my mom and wait for a train to pass. On the radio is playing classical music of a European tradition on the local station. Growing up, I always felt the closest to “culture” or being “cultured” and “classy” when we would listen to classical music of a European tradition playing on CBC Radio. We would listen to it on the way to piano lessons, or to voice/singing lessons, which my mom saved up her money in order to enroll my sister and I in one extracurricular activity of our choosing. We sit as we watch the train pass by. Separating the north end from the south end of the city, this train is located near a field of colossal, white oil wells, next to which sits a billboard – currently featuring an image of an upcoming Bridal Show.

Driving a car, like so many other basic things, is something that needs to be considered intersectionally when it come to how it operates in relation to power, privilege, and oppression. I drive my car as a white woman, and I'm able to traverse through space with a certain privilege and ease. For so many Black Americans,



for example, driving in a car presents a literal threat to their life (thinking here of Dante Wright, Rayshard Brooks, Philando Castle, and many others). I think, too, of the many Indigenous people who have been killed by cars and trucks, from the 2017 murder of Barbara Kentner or the Highway of Tears, or the many Indigenous people who Saskatoon police officers dropped off and left for dead to freeze in Saskatchewan. Driving a truck or a car can also be a signal of difficult and low-paying jobs, of jobs for new immigrants with qualifications exceeding that job, as with the case of Jaskirat Sidhu, who was found to be responsible for the 2018 Humboldt bus crash. Sidhu, who comes from a farming family in India, had immigrated to Canada with a degree in commerce; he is now facing a deportation decision.

As I watch these works now, two years later, I bear witness to the grimness behind basic aspects of settler colonial life in North America – with its common *car culture* – and the latent violences, anxieties, and paranoias therein. I also bear witness to the affects of the pandemic and the time spent alone: all of the waiting, without a sense of when we are *waiting* until; the anxiety that can come from long periods of isolation and doom-scrolling. The touch starvation for those who are single, or who live alone. To essay or *essay* is to try, and as a writer I often work essayistically, even in my artistic work and my curation. I see the works in this exhibition as a starting place for conversation. These are the

results of two-years of immersive observation in a place where I was born and raised, where I grew up as a queer, keener kid, and where I first attended university, studying art and science with Indigenous and Metis scholars like Carmen Robertson and Fidgi Gendron. The autotheory of my inquiry into white, settler, working-class culture in Saskatchewan becomes an “auto” theory, of automobiles and gas stations and highways and car radios, where this culture is analyzed through the symbols of cars and trucks, to be considered intersectionally. And like sitting in a car waiting, there is the feeling of idling—tying into the affects of these past two years, and acknowledging the impact of Indigenous-led movements like Idle No More, wondering when things will change for the better.

Thank you to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (2019-2021) for their support of this work. ■



CONTRIBUTOR BIO

Lauren Gabrielle Fournier (b. 1989, Regina, Saskatchewan, Treaty 4 lands) is a writer and artist-curator. She is a white settler from a working-class, low-income background and a first-generation student and scholar. She holds a PhD in English Literature and completed a Postdoctoral Fellowship in Visual Studies at the University of Toronto in 2021, where she has taught undergraduate and graduate courses in visual concepts and theories, art criticism, and artists' writing. Her book *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* was published by The MIT Press (2021), and has been widely featured and reviewed in such venues as *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism*, *Hyperallergic*, and *Art in America*. In it, she proposes that work by feminist artists like Adrian Piper and many other LGBTQ2SIAA+ and BIPOC artists ought to be considered alongside a literary history of the emergent genre of "autotheory."

She has published fiction and other creative writings internationally, including the recently published short story "The Grateful Dad" in *Soft Punk Magazine* (London, UK, 2021): a story of class, colonialisms, and collectibles set in a blue collar neighborhood in Saskatchewan. As an artist, she works primarily in video and super8 film, drawing from queer DIY and performance for camera traditions. Her curatorial and editorial projects like *Fermenting Feminism* have traveled internationally and have been featured in such publications as the *CBC*, *Die Tageszeitung*, *Kunstkritikk*, and *The New York Times*. Currently, she is writing and thinking about issues related to settler colonialisms and whiteness, microbes and ecologies, class mobility, intergenerational trauma, and the vagus nerve. Her debut novella *The Barista Boys* is a hybrid work of auto-fiction and literary criticism, and is forthcoming through *Fiction Advocate in San Francisco* (2022).

