

AUTO THEORY AND ITS OTHERS

Edited by Becky McLaughlin, Eric Daffron,
Maria Gil Uldemolins, and Kris Pint



AUTOTHEORY AND ITS OTHERS

BEFORE YOU START TO READ THIS BOOK, take this moment to think about making a donation to punctum books, an independent non-profit press,

@ <https://punctumbooks.com/support/>

If you're reading the e-book, you can click on the image below to go directly to our donations site. Any amount, no matter the size, is appreciated and will help us to keep our ship of fools afloat. Contributions from dedicated readers will also help us to keep our commons open and to cultivate new work that can't find a welcoming port elsewhere. Our adventure is not possible without your support.

Vive la Open Access.



Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

AUTOTHEORY AND ITS OTHERS. Copyright © 2026 by the authors and editors. This work carries a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0 International license, which means that you are free to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format, and you may also remix, transform, and build upon the material, as long as you clearly attribute the work to the authors (but not in a way that suggests the authors or punctum books endorses you and your work), you do not use this work for commercial gain in any form whatsoever, and that for any remixing and transformation, you distribute your rebuild under the same license. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

First published in 2026 by punctum books, Earth, Milky Way.
<https://punctumbooks.com>

ISBN-13: 978-1-68571-327-0 (paperbound)

ISBN-13: 978-1-68571-328-7 (PDF)

ISBN-13: 978-1-68571-329-4 (EPUB)

DOI: 10.53288/0530.1.00

LCCN: 2026943283

Library of Congress Cataloging Data is available from the Library of Congress

Editing: Scott Barker and SAJ

Book design: Hatim Eujayl

Cover design: Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei

Cover image: Collage by Becky McLaughlin

 punctumbooks
spontaneous acts of scholarly combustion



HIC SVNT MONSTRA

AUTO THEORY AND ITS OTHERS

**Edited by Becky McLaughlin, Eric Daffron,
Maria Gil Uldemolins, and Kris Pint**



Contents

Introduction <i>Becky McLaughlin and Eric Daffron</i>	15
Anecdotal Theory and Autotheory <i>Jane Gallop</i>	35
The Dialectics of Friendship: A Work of <i>Dialogia-Theoria</i> in Letters <i>Eric Daffron and Becky McLaughlin</i>	55
Monologue on the Crip Education of a Bodymind <i>Andrew David King</i>	85
A Note on the Impossible Novel: For Roland Barthes <i>Jeremy Stewart</i>	131
The Queer Genre of Autocollage: Juxtaposing Fragments of Autotheory as a Way of Navigating the Unscripted Life <i>Emilio Williams</i>	157
“A Lot of Gestures to Unlearn”: Christine Brooke-Rose’s Auto-...practices <i>Hannah Van Hove</i>	189
An Apprenticeship in Not-Knowing <i>Paige Sweet</i>	223

نرگس/Narges/Narcissus <i>poupeh missaghi</i>	249
Writing the Impossible <i>Selah Saterstrom</i>	267
Yours/Mine/Ours: Practice-Led Autotheory, Collective Memory, and Historical Conflict <i>Cat Auburn</i>	297
Seeing Double: Autofabulist Others and Autotheoretical Self- Relation in the Works of Saeed Jones and Lola Flash <i>Alexandra Wood</i>	325
Lo-Fi Critique: Autotheory and Postcriticism <i>Joshua Peter Foley</i>	353
Practicing Uncertainty: Using Art Writing to Tell Us Something Else about the Canon <i>Laura Davidson</i>	377
“Did a bot write this?”: Autofiction and AI <i>Joanna Walsh</i>	401
Epilogue: Flotsam, or Notes for a Transatlantic Conclusion <i>Kris Pint and Maria Gil Ulldemolins</i>	409
Contributor Biographies	427

Acknowledgments

In July 2022, Becky and Eric organized and chaired a three-panel stream titled “Autotheory: Criticism and Practice” for the London Conference in Critical Thought. It was there that they met Maria and Kris, who presented a collaboratively written paper for one of the stream’s three autotheory panels. Perhaps these four editors were drawn together by their collaborative spirit, or perhaps by fate, but, whatever the case may be, Becky and Eric would like to thank the organizers of the London Conference in Critical Thought for having accepted their stream and, thus, for having brought them together with Maria and Kris, a meeting of minds that has resulted in the creation of *Autotheory and Its Others*. Kris and Maria want, in turn, to make sure the credit for getting the ball rolling goes to Becky and Eric, who not only ideated the project but also led the way with endless drive. (We remember frequent and incredibly large cups of coffee being prepared and drunk during Zoom meetings.) Becky, Eric, Maria, and Kris would also like to thank their contributors for the creativity, hard work, and intellectual rigor that they have put into their chapters. An edited collection is only as good as the contributions of those who provide the chapters for it, and those chapters are very good indeed. Many thanks to all!

Becky dedicates this collection to the memory of her loving and supportive mother and father.

Eric dedicates this collection to the memory of Ruskin, his cat and seventeen-year companion.

Maria dedicates this collection to the many coattails she's been able to ride in the process. Thank you.

Kris dedicates this collection to his family.

Introduction

Becky McLaughlin and Eric Daffron

Writing is working; being worked; questioning (in) the between (letting oneself be questioned) of same *and of* other without which nothing lives; undoing death's work by willing the togetherness of one-another, infinitely charged with a ceaseless exchange of one with another.

— Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*¹

Autotheory is arguably a textual shape-shifter. Sometimes it appears to be an aesthetic practice, but at other times it more closely resembles a genre, a methodology, or a form of pedagogy. As an emergent discourse with historical precedents, it lacks a stable definition, and, thus, there are as many approaches to autotheory as there are autotheorists. Perhaps it is first and foremost an opportunity for a writer, a researcher, or an artist to make sense of reality through an embodied and possibly speculative processing of theory, culture, and art in order to better open up past, present, and future worlds. Opening up these worlds implies an acceptance of others, their realities, and their sense-

¹ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 86.

making attempts. Thus, autotheory is not, as it is sometimes perceived to be, narcissistic or solipsistic. Instead, it thrives upon the tangible, sizable presence of the other to confront, expand, and contextualize the auto-, and vice versa.

With autotheory's need of the other in mind, Becky R. McLaughlin and Eric Daffron open this collection with a conversational exchange, in which they share with readers how they came to be practitioners of autotheory, how they define the term, and how this book's goals, purposes, and stakes might best be articulated. In doing so, they develop a theory of otherness, which, in their view, lies at the very heart of autotheory. Their theory was inspired by the transatlantic diversity of this collection's collaborative enterprise. Hailing from Alabama and New York, on one side of the ocean, and from Belgium and Spain, on the other, the editors embody the diversity that they find in autotheory's aspirations. Like an echo, strangely familiar yet resolutely different, an epilogue, by Kris Pint and Maria Gil Ull-demolins, closes this collection.

Conversation

BECKY: My first autotheoretical piece was written in 1992 after two years of studying psychoanalysis under the tutelage of Joan Copjec, then director of the Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Culture at SUNY-Buffalo. Well steeped in psychoanalysis and film theory by the fall of 1992, I took a seminar on feminist theory in which Cixous and Clément's *The Newly Born Woman* was one of the assigned texts. What particularly resonated with me were Cixous's rallying cry that "woman must write her body" and her rousing exhortation, which I took quite personally, to "write yourself," to make your body heard.² Not surprisingly, when I wrote my final paper for that seminar, I titled it "My Life as a Montage, or I Just Wanna Be Fetishized (Feminized?)." The conjunction of psychoanalysis and feminism had created, for me, a space in which not knowing (or knowing dif-

2 Ibid., 94, 97.

ferently) was not only acceptable but also necessary, and, thus, I was engaged in exploratory rather than expository writing, attempting to psychoanalyze myself as Freud himself had done in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. (Anyone who has ever studied psychoanalysis knows that it often leads to the study of oneself whether one likes it or not.) Through writing, I was putting into words the tenebrous periods of my life that had caused psychic distress, and I was filling in some of the blanks in my memory created by surplus repression. In short, I was engaged in the writing cure, not unlike Charlotte Perkins Gilman had been one hundred years earlier when she wrote and published “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892). But in keeping with Cixous’s statement that woman’s discourse, “even when ‘theoretical’ or political, is never simple or linear or ‘objectivized,’ universalized,”³ my paper looked more akin to what Roland Barthes would call collage, “controlled accident,”⁴ or decoupage than to a short story with beginning, middle, and end. It was what Cixous might refer to as a “girl’s journey,” which takes her “to the unknown, to invent.”⁵ My invention, a kind of Frankenstein’s creature, needed a name, and so it occurred to me to call it “auto-theory”⁶ because I was

3 Ibid., 92.

4 Roland Barthes uses the term “controlled accident” in Barthes, “An Almost Obsessive Relation to Writing Instruments,” in *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (Hill and Wang, 1985), 182.

5 Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, 93.

6 Although the term “autotheory” has gained traction because of Maggie Nelson’s use of it, followed by Lauren Fournier’s, I prefer the hyphenated term “auto-theory” because it suggests a relation between the two terms rather than a collapse into oneness. When there is a space created by the hyphen, the two terms suggest self and other. Luce Irigaray may have influenced my thinking about the use of the hyphen, for in her brief powerhouse of a book, *I Love to You*, she argues for the insertion of the preposition “to” into the phrase “I love you.” The resulting clause, “I love to you,” prevents a relation of transitivity, which is “bereft of the other’s irreducibility and potential reciprocity” and which allows one to take another as a direct object upon which to act. Not only is the “to” a “site of the non-reduction of the person to the object,” but it is also “a barrier against alienating the other’s freedom in my subjectivity, my world, my language.” See Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch of a Possible Felicity in History*, trans. Alison Martin (Routledge, 1996), 109–10.

coupling feminism's notion of the personal as political with the high theory of Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan. It was Stacey Young who got credit for coining the term, however, in her *Changing the Wor(l)d* (1997). Young and I are an example of "multiple discovery" or "simultaneous invention," a situation in which a discovery or invention is made independently by multiple persons. No doubt there were others besides Young and me who were using the term before it burst onto the scene in 1997.

ERIC: I came to autotheory by way of a much different trajectory and a much later one at that. In fact, you were instrumental in guiding me down that path. (How strange that we often claim interests and ideas as our own only to realize later that others deserve some credit for their genesis!) You may recall that, after completing *The Body in Theory: Essays after Lacan and Foucault*, our previous edited collection, we were itching to continue our collaboration. I reminded you that 2020 marked the fortieth anniversary of Roland Barthes's death. You suggested that we write a play to mark the occasion. Then began a twelve-month writing exercise in the initial year of the COVID-19 pandemic and, incidentally, a year before Lauren Fournier published the first monograph on autotheory. Unlike your debut autotheoretical piece, a form of auto-psychoanalysis, our play, a dialogue, aspired to thwart "death's work," to invoke Cixous, "by willing the togetherness of one another." In fact, one of this book's goals is to counter the persistent complaint that autotheory indulges in narcissism. Shortly after we completed our play, I went solo, writing two Barthes-inspired pieces. I suppose you could say that Barthes had become my muse. And though I now understand why is he so closely aligned with autotheory, I still had not encountered the word. Eventually, I came across it, but quite by chance. Perhaps you have had the experience of surfing the internet for one thing only to find yourself elsewhere. That happened to me one summer night in 2021 as I mysteriously landed on the term "autotheory." I uncannily recognized my writing and shared my discovery with you only to learn that you had been writing in that vein for almost three decades.

BECKY: Your use of the word “uncanny” to describe your recognition of the type of writing you were doing is well chosen, for it suggests a fruitful way to characterize autotheory. In fact, autotheory could be called an uncanny discourse because of the interplay between the text (auto) and its double (theory), the text (the autobiographical) and its paratext (the theoretical), the host (text) and its parasite (citation).⁷ It could also be called an uncanny discourse in its mirroring of the self, an uncanny discursive object in its own right. Both familiar and strange, the self is an other, split as it is between conscious and unconscious knowledge or “thought.”⁸ But how do we get access to the unconscious, you might ask? One way is by writing. Through my body—specifically my fingertips gripping the barrel of a pen or pressing the keys of a laptop—I write in order to find out what I will write. Here the *auto* of autotheory does double duty, becoming not only the auto associated with the autobiographical but also the *auto* associated with the automatic writing practiced by the surrealists, important precursors of autotheorists.

ERIC: I think you are onto something with your series of uncanny doubles. I especially like the interplay between the text (auto) and its citations (theory), which is akin to your host (text) and its parasite (citation). To quote other voices, especially dead ones, is to stage the return of the repressed. It is as if, Schelling wrote, “everything that ought to have remained...secret and hidden [...] has come to light.”⁹ In fact, by citing Schelling and later echoing him without quotation marks, Freud enacted that very same uncanny return in his own essay on the matter. Of

7 These two terms could obviously be reversed; that is, the text could be the parasite and the citation the host from which the text draws its parasitical sustenance.

8 Freud discovered a “radical heteronomy [...] gaping within man,” remarks Lacan, following this statement with a question: “Who, then, is this other to whom I am more attached than to myself...?” See Jacques Lacan, “Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (W.W. Norton, 1977), 172.

9 Quoted in Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” in *Writings on Art and Literature* (Stanford University Press, 1997), 199.

course, as scholars, we quote others all the time. Yet autotheory makes citation visible, almost palpable. Think of Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, and Joanna Walsh's *Break.up*. Those texts feature citations in the margin as if those voices were on the verge of encroaching upon the authors' own. Perhaps I am giving those texts uncanny dimensions that their authors would disavow. Yet, in a chronicle written late in life, Barthes recorded an incident that had all the makings of a Gothic story. One evening, as he exited a ballet performance, he marveled not at the dancer but at Proust. For, unexpectedly, Barthes had relived a scene from *In Search of Lost Time*, one in which the narrator also goes to the theater. Rather than remaining on the page, as it ought to have done, the scene came back to light as an uncanny harbinger of Barthes's lived experience. "And no doubt that is what reading is," Barthes concluded, "rewriting the text of the work within the text of our lives."¹⁰

BECKY: Barthes's statement is a useful challenge to what some critics of autotheory see as a troubling contradiction in its debt to feminism and its engagement with the high theory of Eurocentric, white, male thinkers. Like Barthes's rewriting of Proust's text, performance artist Adrian Piper rewrites Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* within the text (and context) of her own life. Fournier has pointed out that autotheory itself engages in philosophical inquiry or theorizing that exceeds the categorical limits of the written form and that manifests itself in works of art, digital practices, performances, and photography. This exceeding of limits suggests one of the things that autotheory has in common with the Gothic: its subversion of conceptual boundaries and categories. And, thus, I do not think that you are being fanciful when you see Gothic dimensions in the texts you mention. In fact, it seems to me that citation itself is both a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The more we handle a theoretical text — say, Barthes's

10 Roland Barthes, "Day by Day with Roland Barthes," in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 101.

The Pleasure of the Text—and go beyond it for our own ends, the more real it appears, the more we subjectify it, make it a part of ourselves, introject it as an ego ideal. For example, when we admire, and perhaps adore, an intellectual hero such as Barthes, we want to emulate him, *be* him. Citing him is one small way in which we can achieve that sense of identification. On the other hand, those (un)dead voices that beckon to us from the margins are like sirens calling us to our doom by invoking the anxiety of influence—or, worse still, like tapeworms burrowing into the bowels of our text. The very fact that the text's other (i.e., citation) is akin to both Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde suggests the elasticity of autotheory, for its doublings continue to radiate outward in ever-widening circles.

ERIC: Your closing image brings to mind scholars of autotheory who go to painstaking lengths to define the term. Yet their efforts defeat the mode's purpose. For autotheory has always struck me as an invitation, an occasion to explore this or that aspect of lived experience by drawing on any number of discourses. Thus, the *theory* in *autotheory* is misleading. Indeed, *autotheory* is elastic enough to include not only theory but also art, music, literature, and history. Witness the sheer variety of “other” discourses in this collection. In that spirit, participants in my autotheory seminar found on the syllabus the usual suspects and also a few works that, though not precisely outside the autotheoretical canon, nonetheless challenged my students to rethink the mode's aspirations.

BECKY: If autotheory is a “mode,” as you refer to it, perhaps it is more fruitful to consider its function than its definition. As I see it, one of autotheory's main functions is to pry discourse loose from the stranglehold that traditional academic institutions have had on it, a pedagogical situation in which discourse is tightly controlled or policed through organs such as the five-paragraph essay, the research paper, Turnitin.com, and what Barthes refers to as “the very oppressive, not to say repressive, constraints brought to bear upon students by the myth of the

outline and syllogistic Aristotelian development.”¹¹ Employing autotheory in the classroom is transformative in its ability to cure what Paulo Freire refers to as “narration sickness,” wherein the teacher alienates the student by expounding upon texts and topics that have little or nothing to do with the lived experience of the student.¹² And if the ever-widening circles of autotheory are capable of including Freire, they are also capable of including Richard Miller, who advocates writing “institutional autobiography,” arguing that only by acknowledging the personal dimension and recognizing the role it plays in our scholarly work will academic writing remain meaningful.¹³ I would argue, however, that writing institutional autobiography is important not only for scholarly but also for pedagogical endeavors. If we are to “address the student as a whole person,” as Michael Roth and countless others have encouraged us to do, we have to *be* whole persons.¹⁴ Introducing the personal into an institutional venue such as the classroom allows us to be teachers, scholars, and persons all rolled into one.

ERIC: I could not agree with you more. In fact, my greatest satisfaction in teaching the autotheory seminar was not just sharing my passion for the subject but also, it turns out, inspiring a handful of students to compose their own autotheoretical meditations. Thus, you did not overstate the matter when you said earlier that autotheory’s “doublings continue to radiate outward in ever-widening circles,” circles that, in my case, began with you, only eventually to encompass others whom you have never encountered.

11 Barthes, “An Almost Obsessive Relation to Writing Instruments,” 181.

12 See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (Herder and Herder, 1970), 57.

13 See Richard Miller, *Writing at the End of the World* (Pittsburgh University Press, 2005), 138.

14 Michael S. Roth, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (Yale University Press, 2014), xv.

BECKY: By encouraging your students to compose their own autotheoretical meditations and thus allowing them to be whole persons (or as whole as they can be as split subjects) in an institutional setting, you have helped address the alienation that students often feel in response to the university's relentless focus on evaluation and judgment. But although autotheory allows students and teachers alike to engage in expressive, personal writing alongside the more traditional expository and impersonal, it can also be used heuristically. In fact, I have employed it quite effectively in the classroom to explain difficult psychoanalytic concepts via personal anecdote. An example of this use can be seen at the end of Chapter 2, "The Dialectics of Friendship: A Work of *Dialogia-Theoria* in Letters." The pedagogical and the heuristic are only two of the many spheres in which autotheory can be put to use, however, and one of this collection's goals is to showcase these and the many other spheres in which autotheory has found a place to roost.

ERIC: "Other" is the operant word, for autotheory has always gestured toward the other.

BECKY: Yes, especially from a Lacanian standpoint. Because Lacan conceives of the self as an other, when I write about myself, I write about an other. Hence autotheory is and always has been a misnomer or an impossibility, more akin to autofiction than to autofact. Indeed, the way that Lacan has conceived of the subject, traditionally understood as the "self" or the "individual," can be used quite fruitfully to think, talk, and write about the "failure" of autobiographical writing — that is, its inability to tell all and, perhaps more remarkably, to tell the truth. What happens when I begin to write about myself is that I am immediately guilty of what Lacan calls "ego discourse," a discourse based on the false image I have of myself, and, thus, you could say that I immediately find myself in the realm of fiction rather than that of fact. Not only does this make autobiographical writing impossible, but this also makes those who attempt it continue to attempt it — over and over and over again — as I have done. Perhaps one

way to grapple with the problem of impossibility, then, is to define autobiographical writing not as a mode but as a practice: It is not a thing that *is*, but a thing that I *do*. Perhaps another way is to admit that even though the being who speaks — that is, the subject — can never be entirely represented in language, this does not mean that the “I” is or should be disregarded. What it does mean is that the “I” occupies a tenuous relationship to language and thus to reality as constructed. In light of this, we must acknowledge the fragility of any autobiographical enterprise.¹⁵

ERIC: If I were to apply your musings on autobiography to autotheory, I’d say you seem to be suggesting that the latter should properly be called “allotheory.”

BECKY: Actually, I see autotheory and allotheory as two sides of the same coin — allotheory being housed within autotheory — and, thus, I do not see allotheory as separate from autotheory.

In fact, I am beginning to think that making a distinction between autotheory and allotheory would be a misstep. Autotheory and allotheory are always in a kind of dialectical tension with each other, which means that one cannot exist without the other. In short, they are not separate practices but part and parcel of the same practice.

ERIC: We have made the otherness or relationality of autotheory explicit in many of our autotheoretical endeavors, not only in this introduction but also in our chapter herein, but we are certainly not the first to consider such a dynamic. I am reminded, for example, of Jane Gallop’s “anecdotal theory.” You and Gallop go a long way back, at least textually. Do you think that her coinage partially glosses what we have tried to accomplish here and later in our chapter?

15 See Becky Renee McLaughlin, *Hysteria, Perversion, and Paranoia in “The Canterbury Tales”*: “Wild” Analysis and the Symptomatic Storyteller (Medieval Institute Publications, 2020), 24.

BECKY: Yes, my textual relationship with Gallop does go a long way back. In fact, before there was *Anecdotal Theory*, there was *Thinking through the Body* (1988), with a daring picture of Gallop giving birth on the front cover. That book, like *The Newly Born Woman*, gave me and countless others who read her book permission to challenge the compartmentalization of public and private knowledge. Without knowing it, Gallop was already making the case for autotheory by placing such a personal photograph on the cover of a theory-laden book published by an academic press. And in *Anecdotal Theory*, Gallop could be referring directly to your and my autotheoretical exchanges in this introduction and in our chapter when she states the following: “Many personal conversations are sites of anecdotal theorizing: friends and confidantes exchange stories from [their] lives and together try to make sense of them.”¹⁶ So, yes, what Gallop calls “anecdotal theory” is very much in keeping with what you and I have tried to accomplish, for her final sentence could be our own: “Anecdotal theory ... speaks with the desire for a response.”¹⁷

ERIC: In that spirit, we should now turn to others, to our contributors, who have been in a dialectical relationship with us and our fellow coeditors for some time. For they, too, have spoken with a desire for a response and with new ways for thinking about autotheory’s others.

Chapter Summaries

We hear first from Jane Gallop, who, in Chapter 1, “Anecdotal Theory and Autotheory,” reflects on a term that she coined and one that she only recently encountered. Anecdotal theory is arguably one of autotheory’s others, but the relationship between the two terms is far from straightforward. Crediting Barthes as an important influence on her work, Gallop acknowledges that

16 Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (Duke University Press, 2002), 20.

17 *Ibid.*, 164.

some of her anecdotal theory could be retroactively classified as autotheory. Yet Gallop insists on crucial distinctions between the two: Anecdotal theory is a method — of using anecdotes as the basis for theorizing — but autotheory is a genre. And even though anecdotal theory sometimes draws from a personal reservoir of narratives, at other times it borrows incidents from others. In so doing, it borders on a new and more social kind of anecdotal theory that Gallop describes as “transindividual.” Now, with hindsight, she wonders whether transindividual anecdotal theory could serve as a corrective to the solipsism of which autotheory is often accused. Unfortunately, she has never pursued this line of thinking in her own work but forecasts it as a promising future direction.

Eric Daffron and Becky R. McLaughlin take on Gallop’s challenge in Chapter 2, “The Dialectics of Friendship: A Work of *Dialogia-Theoria* in Letters.” In an epistolary rather than a conversational exchange, the form their dialogue took in this introduction, these lifelong friends share and theorize personal stories whose topics range from dressing in women’s clothes, crossing suspension bridges, and ordering New York City pizza to spying a childhood friend’s genitals, sporting a spurious facial mole, and psychoanalyzing bungled actions. To facilitate their theoretical enterprise, they invite into their midst Barthes and the other usual suspects along with the unexpected company of Edmund Burke, Agnes Collard, and John Donne. Daffron and McLaughlin call their brand of theorizing *dialogia-theoria*, a portmanteau that expresses their conviction that “the best thinking — perhaps the only true thinking — occurs in dialogue with others.”

Barthes also serves as muse for the authors of the next three chapters. In “Monologue on the Crip Education of the Bodymind” (Chapter 3), Andrew David King demonstrates that disability critique is one of autotheory’s others. For both disability critique and autotheory invite reflections on knowledge and embodiment. Across a series of letters to and from the self, interspersed with provocative images, King shares their “crip education,” a multilayered experience of disability and illness.

Engaging with queer, crip, and trans theory, along with Barthes, Freud, and others, this chapter explores topics as diverse as temporality, illness, and the “bodymind,” a term borrowed from disability critique to designate, in King’s words, “both the ontological fusion and the conceptual partitioning of material bodies and immaterial minds.” Ultimately, King proposes that disability and illness can do more than serve as theory’s subject matter. They constitute theorizing in their own right.

Jeremy Stewart takes the reader on a car ride over the course of Chapter 4, “A Note on the Impossible Novel: For Roland Barthes.” His travel guide is none other than “The Preparation of the Novel,” Barthes’s last lecture course, which proves less reliable than the reader might have at first hoped. On the whole, Barthes’s oeuvre is often hailed as a noteworthy precursor of the autotheoretical movement. Yet his final lecture course troubles the veracity upon which autotheory is allegedly built. In a stunning experiment, Stewart activates voice-typing technology so that he can write as he drives. In so doing, he stages a collision, as it were, between “auto” (the self, the vehicle) and “accident” (the contingencies that interrupt self-narration). Dwelling on the course’s fundamental irony — a fantasy to create a novel that never comes to fruition — Stewart probes such thorny matters as self, fiction, and fantasy. By the end of the joyride, the reader learns that truth can no longer assume an unqualified position as one of autotheory’s steadfast others.

In Chapter 5, “The Queer Genre of Autocollage: Juxtaposing Fragments of Autotheory as a Way of Navigating the Unscripted Life,” Emilio Williams invites the reader to enter the queer archive, a site of scattered fragments ripe for exploration. His chapter, an experimental essay collage, is a work of autotheory, but it also brings into play autoethnography and research, two of autotheory’s others. Williams investigates a provocative range of textual, visual, and hybrid collages from the ancients to the moderns, including ones by David Wojnarowicz, Greer Lankston, and, again, Barthes. With themes ranging from transgression to seduction, Williams closes with a meditation on the twin functions of queer collage: to grapple with one’s own other-

ness and to seek out others who find in collage's fragments moments of recognition and opportunities for kinship.

Stewart and Williams find themselves in good company with Hannah Van Hove, whose Chapter 6, like their own, experiments with form. "A Lot of Gestures to Unlearn": Christine Brooke-Rose's Auto-...practices" is a consideration of and response to Christine Brooke-Rose's final work, the autofictional novel *Life, End Of*. Adopting Brooke-Rose's constraint of writing in the third person with neither personal pronouns nor possessive adjectives, Van Hove explores unlearning, a concept borrowed from Brooke-Rose's novel. In the left-hand column of her essay, Van Hove investigates Brooke-Rose's attempt to narrate her life by unlearning customary ways of telling stories. On the right, Van Hove stages her own effort to unlearn traditional scholarship by probing her investment in Brooke-Rose's life. The two-column dialogue textually and graphically illustrates the dialectical relationship between auto and other that characterizes chapters in this book.

If for Van Hove "unlearning" is the operative word, for Paige Sweet, it is "unknowing." In "An Apprenticeship in Not-Knowing" (Chapter 7), Sweet reconsiders Jacques Lacan's notion of "the subject supposed to know," a knowledge that properly belongs to the analysand's unconscious. In so doing, she uncovers a paradox. If the analyst-in-training must assume the position of "the subject supposed not to know," what does it mean for the experienced analyst not to know, too? Reflecting on the constitutive absence structuring one of psychoanalysis's fundamental relationships, Sweet weaves together memories of her own apprenticeship in not-knowing with Clarice Lispector's *An Apprenticeship or the Book of Pleasures*. Through this process of interlacing, Sweet discovers that the psyche is a structure of meaning that occurs between self and other and that psyche and soul are one and the same. In the end, Sweet proposes that psychoanalysis, one of autotheory's others, is a practice of remaking the soul out of not-knowing.

Although poupeh missaghi's aim in "نرگس/Narges/Narcissus" (Chapter 8) is different from Sweet's, their chapters share

interesting resonances that make reading them back-to-back a fruitful experience. Like Sweet, missaghi makes use of psychoanalysis to cope with absence. In missaghi's case, however, the absence is not that of a lover but that of her homeland, Iran, from which she is currently estranged. Given Sweet's and missaghi's relation to Freud, it is not surprising that both make use of Greek mythology, the myth of Psyche functioning as a touchstone for Sweet and the myth of Narcissus for missaghi. And just as Sweet uses Clarice Lispector in her exploration of the soul's journey to love, missaghi uses Hannah Arendt to muse about the relationship between love and justice in a corrupt world. Through missaghi's "meandering associations," she creates a textual montage that is at once a soulful meditation on her beloved flower, "narcissus from the city of Shiraz," and a cry for social justice — not for herself but for the other, especially the children of Tehran who are forced to work when they should be at play. Despite the subtle reek of trauma that inhabits "نرگس/Narges/Narcissus," missaghi's personal anecdotes and observations give off a scent as fragrant as her beloved flower.

Selah Saterstrom's personal anecdotes and observations give off a scent, too, but one that is hardly fragrant. Instead, it is the scent of kudzu, an invasive perennial vine that snakes through Saterstrom's "Writing the Impossible" (Chapter 9) smelling of soft grapes and decay. The reek of trauma is anything but subtle in Saterstrom's exploration of intergenerational suicide in rural Mississippi, for she writes with such candor and exquisite detail of her stepfather's death that one can hear the drone of cicadas at the county dump, smell the Doral cigarettes he smoked, and see the cheap Confederate flag stapled to the wood-paneled wall in the room where he shot himself. But, as Saterstrom so majestically illustrates through her writing, out of trauma has come what she calls her "embodied love affair with Being" and a daily commitment to awareness, both of which form the foundation of her creative writing pedagogy, one of autotheory's more surprising others. In fact, she includes a sample creative writing exercise in her chapter. If one were attempting to write a story seemingly impossible to write, one could find no better

guide than Saterstrom into the welter of details out of which story arises.

Whereas Saterstrom writes about individual memory, Cat Auburn writes about collective memory, but she shares with Saterstrom a commitment to writing about place. In "Yours/Mine/Ours: Practice-led Autotheory, Collective Memory, and Historical Conflict" (Chapter 10), Auburn writes cogently and urgently about nationhood and identity in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, focusing on the Anzac legend drawn from the battlefields of World War I. Although the Anzac legend is held up as an origin story and cultural exemplar in both countries, Auburn has struggled to see herself reflected in its historic tales of conflict, and, thus, she has been compelled to search for a different approach to the forms of nostalgic reenactment and language of commemoration that typify the legend. The result of her search is an autotheoretical project that reimagines the legend through her material, haptic body and through artistic practices such as bead-threading, bronze-casting, narrating, self-filming, and swimming. In embracing her body and her autotheoretical self—a self that is not visible within the Anzac legend—her aim is to disrupt the legend's prevailing narrative in a shift away from conquest and heroic individualism toward cooperation, inclusivity, and the everyday realities of human experience.

The everyday reality that informs Alexandra Wood's Chapter 11 is the experience of being reared in an evangelical church that fostered unquestioning allegiance to white patriarchal structures and to a fundamentalist sense of black-and-white logic that has proved difficult for Wood to shake. And, thus, like Auburn's need to reimagine the Anzac legend and its influence on her identity, Wood has found it necessary to reimagine the body as represented by her church, which insisted on privileging spirit over flesh, thereby ignoring the body's real-life conditions. Her attempt to reimagine the body, recounted in "Seeing Double: Autofabulist Others and Autotheoretical Self-Relation in the Works of Saeed Jones and Lola Flash," led Wood to artists who embrace the body in their work. For Wood, Jones and

Flash bring together two dimensions of autotheory — its attention to embodiment and its sense of multiplicity and plurality — that allow her to argue that the autotheoretical body itself can be multiplied not only discursively but also virtually and performatively. She terms this process “autofabulation” in order to gesture toward its imaginative and speculative possibilities as well as to establish it in a genealogy of theory that opens up new ways of seeing and responding to both ourselves and others.

In “Lo-Fi Critique: Autotheory and Postcriticism” (Chapter 12), Joshua Peter Foley opens up new ways of seeing and responding to self and other through his use of what he calls “lo-fi critique.” Like low-fidelity music, which makes deliberate use of “flaws” such as tape hiss, feedback, and buzzing, lo-fi critique not only embraces the inconclusive and the messy but also allows space for flaws and imperfections in one’s ideas and claims. Foley’s development of the concept of lo-fi critique arose, like Wood’s concept of autofabulation, in response to an oppressive institution, specifically to what he perceives to be academia’s inexorable “publish-or-perish” imperative. In developing the concept, Foley combines postcriticism, which eschews the model of the solitary critic, with autotheory’s concern for relationality and the communal. And, thus, lo-fi critique, as Foley imagines it, would unseat the single-authored article or monograph as index of a brilliant but enclosed mind in pursuit of mastery and expertise, replacing it with a form of criticism more effective for collective political and cultural struggle.

The political and cultural struggle that Laura Davidson writes about in “Practicing Uncertainty: Using Art Writing to Tell Us Something Else about the Canon” (Chapter 13) is best articulated by the caption on a 1989 Guerilla Girls’ poster: “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than 4% percent of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.” A quick Google search will show that the answer to the Guerilla Girls’ question continues to be yes, for in 2024, eighteen major art museums in the United States had collections that were the product of 87-percent male artists. It is statistics such as this one that drive Davidson’s response to

Daisy Lafarge's novel *Paul*, a response in which she uses a mash-up of art criticism, autofiction, autotheory, and feminist critique to grapple with issues surrounding the artist Paul Gauguin, such as the male gaze and colonization. Given the versatility of art writing, one of autotheory's most significant others, Davidson uses this creative, interdisciplinary practice to write about art, with art, and as art, for in her response to Lafarge's novel, Davidson creates an autofictional narrator who mirrors Lafarge's Frances, a young woman whose mind is slowly but surely being colonized by a dominant, older man named Paul who has — not surprisingly — spent time traveling in Tahiti. The challenge for Davidson is to determine what the "something else" is that art writing uncovers about encounters with the canon and what it contributes to our understanding of art history and cultural discourse.

Like the challenge that Davidson takes on and addresses through an autofictional narrator, Joanna Walsh took on the challenge, in 2021, of producing within a five-day period a 100,000-word work that questions the authority in self-authorship, the reliability of the confessional form, the value of writing as content, and the gendering of language and creativity. What made this challenge unique was Walsh's use of one of autotheory's most controversial others, AI, to generate the work. In response to the recent proliferation of subservient female-gendered chatbots and voice assistants such as Siri, Walsh generated an AI version of herself as a writer and autofictionist by bringing together all of her published and unpublished writings and training an AI of her own making on them. In "Did a bot write this?': Autofiction and AI" (Chapter 14), she provides an account of that process and of the plethora of questions her AI-generated work gave rise to: Do we exist symbiotically? Am I its mother? Is it mine? Is it my master, employer, slave? Or vice versa? Do I steal its earnings? Does it steal my material? Do I work to support it? When we read each other's work, are we moved by it, envious? Do we each think we could do better? Rather than answering these questions, however, Walsh leaves them dangling in midair to tantalize and to invite the reader to do so.

Like Walsh's, the other chapters in this volume collectively raise more questions than they answer. Yet, despite their sheer diversity, they nonetheless cohere around a single insight of the versatility of autotheory and the fruitful relation between it and its many others.

Bibliography

- Barthes, Roland. "An Almost Obsessive Relation to Writing Instruments." In *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980*, translated by Linda Coverdale. Hill and Wang, 1985.
- . "Day by Day with Roland Barthes." In *On Signs*, edited by Marshall Blonsky. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.
- Cixous, Hélène, and Catherine Clément. *The Newly Born Woman*. Translated by Betsy Wing. University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- Freire, Paolo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. Herder and Herder, 1970.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The 'Uncanny.'" In *Writings on Art and Literature*. Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Gallop, Jane. *Anecdotal Theory*. Duke University Press, 2002.
- Irigaray, Luce. *I Love to You: Sketch of a Possible Felicity in History*. Translated by Alison Martin. Routledge, 1996.
- Lacan, Jacques. "Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious." In *Écrits: A Selection*, translated by Alan Sheridan. W.W. Norton, 1977.
- McLaughlin, Becky Renee. *Hysteria, Perversion, and Paranoia in "The Canterbury Tales": "Wild" Analysis and the Symptomatic Storyteller*. Medieval Institute Publications, 2020.
- Miller, Richard. *Writing at the End of the World*. Pittsburgh University Press, 2005.
- Roth, Michael S. *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*. Yale University Press, 2014.

Anecdotal Theory and Autotheory

Jane Gallop

I first encountered the term “autotheory” in the summer of 2020. Early that year, I heard rumors of a new article discussing my *Living with His Camera* (2003). Eager to see what was being said about this largely ignored, nearly twenty-year-old book, I got my hands on the article just as soon as it was published. The article appeared in a special issue of *Arizona Quarterly* devoted to the topic of autotheory. Written by Annamarie Jagose and Lee Wallace, “Dicktation: Autotheory in the Coupled Voice” discusses my book along with Chris Kraus’s *I Love Dick* (1997). I was happy indeed to find my book in such company. While *Living with His Camera* is hardly known at all, Kraus’s book has even been adapted for television, and it is regularly mentioned in discussions of autotheory.

I eagerly perused Jagose and Wallace’s piece, but I had never heard the term “autotheory.” In their introduction, they categorize me along with Kraus as “feminist autotheorists.”¹ Although I have considered myself a feminist for half a century, in 2020

1 Annamarie Jagose and Lee Wallace, “Dicktation: Autotheory in the Coupled Voice,” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 76, no. 1 (2020): 111.

I found myself with an additional identity and a new category for my work.

I had never heard of autotheory, but it turns out that I had been doing it for almost twenty years. And the context of the special issue made it clear that autotheory was a *thing*, that people were talking about it. I did not know what autotheory was, but I was happy to think that it might provide a context in which my little-read book could become newly relevant.

Just looking at the word “autotheory,” I had some sense of how it could apply to *Living with His Camera*. The “Methodological Preface” to that book characterizes the “writing I am trying to do” as “a writing that combines intellectual work with self-reflection, theory with memoir.”² This combination of “theory with memoir” and “self-reflection” sounds indeed like something that might be called autotheory.

And, despite my unfamiliarity, there was another aspect of this new thing called autotheory, as I first encountered it in 2020, that really and immediately clicked, another aspect that particularly spoke to me. The introduction to the *Arizona Quarterly* special issue opens by discussing Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015), “celebrated [...] as writing of a new kind, called ‘autotheory.’”³ Although I had never heard of autotheory, beginning in 2015 I often heard about *The Argonauts*, for people would write to ask what I thought about my appearance in this best-selling book.

Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, which has played such a central role in autotheory, in fact talks about *Living with His Camera*. In the passage that made so many people write to me, Nelson recounts a seminar she attended when she was in graduate school in the late 1990s:

Gallop would be presenting new work [...] about being photographed by her husband [...]. She was trying to talk

2 Jane Gallop, *Living with His Camera* (Duke University Press, 2003), 13.

3 Robyn Wiegman, “Introduction: Autotheory Theory,” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 76, no. 1 (2020): 1.

about photography from the standpoint of the photographed subject [...]. And she was coupling this subjective position with that of being a mother [...]. She was taking on Barthes's *Camera Lucida*.⁴

What Nelson heard me present was an early version of the first chapter of *Living with His Camera*.

Nelson's encounter with *Living* is highly dramatic as she witnesses my presentation being viciously attacked by my appointed respondent, Rosalind Krauss. *The Argonauts* gives a detailed narrative account of this event over the course of several pages, ending thus: "I was enough of a feminist to refuse any knee-jerk quarantining of the [...] maternal from the realm of intellectual profundity. [...] In the face of such shaming, I felt no choice. I stood with Gallop."⁵

Ever since I first read this scene, I have understood Nelson's announced solidarity with me as between two writers speaking from their experience of maternity. Yet, since my recent acquaintance with this new genre, I would add that Nelson is also standing in solidarity with *Living's* autotheoretical experiment. *The Argonauts* describes what I was doing as bringing my personal experience into "the realm of intellectual profundity," as "contaminating serious academic space with [my] [...] unresolved, self-involved thinking."⁶ In other words, Nelson witnesses my being shamed for contaminating *theory* with *auto*. The scene Nelson so vividly recalls could be taken as the scene of the academic rejection of autotheory.

The Jane Gallop scene in *The Argonauts* stands out in a number of ways as different, I would say, from the rest of the book. I might even go so far as to say that Nelson's book includes my late 1990s work as a precursor to its own genre experiment, "refusing the quarantining of the maternal from the realm of in-

4 Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Gray Wolf Press, 2015), 39–40.

5 Ibid., 42.

6 Ibid., 41.

tellectual profundity.”⁷ If *The Argonauts* is a prime example of autotheory, its account seems to inscribe my work as a model for its genre, for its new kind of writing.

Whatever Nelson’s relation to my work might be, juxtaposing *Living with The Argonauts* brings into focus an important influence on both texts: Roland Barthes. Nelson takes her title from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), the French theorist’s experiment in autobiography. Although this book is often referred to as an autobiography, it is also recognized as a work of theory by one of the foremost literary theorists of the twentieth century. Five years later, Barthes wrote *Camera Lucida*, which is in fact the model for my autotheory. I state in the preface to *Living*, for example, that “Barthes has been a major influence in my intellectual formation, both as a theorist and a writer. *Camera Lucida* models for me the sort of writing I am trying to do, a writing that combines intellectual work with self-reflection, theory with memoir.”⁸

Putting Nelson’s use of Barthes and mine together suggests we might need to give him more consideration than we have as an influence, perhaps even as a pioneer, in autotheory. Barthes was not a feminist, and since we tend to give autotheory a feminist frame, we may overlook him, even though he was arguably a queer theorist *avant la lettre*. All the books of the last five years of his life, culminating in *Camera Lucida*, were in fact daring and important autotheoretical experiments,⁹ and I might even want to claim Barthes’s so-called autobiography as the first instance of autotheory.

* * *

Barthes, to be sure, never used the term “autotheory” to name what he was doing in the 1970s, nor did I in 2003. Although

7 Ibid., 42.

8 Gallop, *Living*, 12–13.

9 Along with Barthes’s *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975) and *Camera Lucida* (1980), I would want to include his *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977), as an example of autotheory and of queer theory, all three *avant la lettre*.

Jagose and Wallace's article claims *Living* as an example of autotheory, they acknowledge that that was not what I called what I was doing: "Gallop's *Living with His Camera* is an extended exercise in what Gallop calls 'anecdotal theory,' a recognizable derivative — if not forerunner — of autotheory."¹⁰

The phrase "anecdotal theory" appears as the title of my *Anecdotal Theory* (Duke University Press, 2002). Although *Living* never uses that phrase, Jagose and Wallace identify the book as an "extended exercise in what Gallop calls 'anecdotal theory.'"¹¹ And, more to my point here, they connect anecdotal theory to autotheory. But what exactly the connection is remains, in their formulation, a bit unclear.

"Recognizable derivative — if not forerunner" — Jagose and Wallace categorize "anecdotal theory" as a "derivative" of autotheory but immediately after, though parenthetically, suggest it might be not a derivative but a "forerunner."¹² At stake in that difference is temporal sequence, for a derivative comes after, a forerunner before. Given the 2002 date of my coining "anecdotal theory," I would think it would be more forerunner than derivative, but I am not as interested here in the temporal relation of the two terms as in their conceptual relation. That, in fact, is the topic of this chapter.

Yet, to linger a bit with Jagose and Wallace's contradictory formulation of the relation, let us note that the word "forerunner" means "harbinger, precursor, something that provides advance notice," which is to say that, though it has temporal priority, its significance depends upon the important thing that will come later. That is, while the words "derivative" and "forerunner" suggest opposite sequences, they share the connotation that "autotheory" is the major term, "anecdotal theory" the variant. This relative significance makes sense because this discussion of anecdotal theory occurs in the context of a special journal issue on autotheory.

¹⁰ Jagose and Wallace, "Dicktation," 112.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Jagose and Wallace are not the only scholars to connect anecdotal theory to autotheory. In the only book-length study of autotheory to date, Lauren Fournier also cites anecdotal theory; her *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2021) first mentions my “anecdotal theory” along with Nancy K. Miller’s “personal criticism” as 1990s precursors to the twenty-first-century trend it is studying.¹³ She mentions it again as a source for *The Argonauts*.¹⁴ Although Fournier’s book does not mention *Living*, it does discuss two other better-known books of mine. Fournier writes about my *Anecdotal Theory* (2002), taking time to explain the concept of anecdotal theory, and calls my use of this practice in the first essay of that book an “autotheoretical inquiry.”¹⁵

For Fournier, *Anecdotal Theory* is not in fact the starting point of my “anecdotal theory” or of my “autotheoretical inquiry.” Her discussion of anecdotal theory begins by stating that “Jane Gallop introduced the practice that she would come to call ‘anecdotal theory’ in her controversial and autotheoretical work *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment*.”¹⁶ Although that 1997 book never uses the term “anecdotal theory,” Fournier recognizes it as an example of the practice I would name five years later (“the practice she would come to call ‘anecdotal theory’”). In this exposition of anecdotal theory, Fournier calls *Feminist Accused* an “autotheoretical work” and, discussing it again in a later chapter, an “autotheoretical book.”¹⁷ Although she does not consider the book that Jagose and Wallace write about, I take Fournier to confirm their sense that what I call “anecdotal theory” is what they call “autotheory,” but from an earlier period.

Thus, in 2020 and again in 2021, I came upon a new name for what I had been doing for three decades. I felt happy at the new relevance of my work, but I also felt a sense of regret, bad timing:

13 Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (MIT Press, 2021), 16.

14 Ibid., 153.

15 Ibid., 186.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 186, 251.

I felt I had missed my chance. Because as I learned about autotheory, learned that it could describe my own practice, I was all too aware that just a year before the special autotheory issue of *Arizona Quarterly*, I had published a new book that combined theory and memoir, where once again I characterized what I was doing as anecdotal theory. If only I had kept up better, I could have claimed my *Sexuality, Disability, and Aging* (2019) as belonging to the trending genre of autotheory.

* * *

Jagose and Wallace do in fact mention my *Sexuality, Disability, and Aging* in their article, but only in a footnote that recognizes my latest book as autotheory. Their article, the only account to date of my work as autotheory, thus cites four of my books: in addition to *Living*, which they focus on, and the brief note to my latest, they also mention the two books Fournier discusses. I want to claim these four books as examples of autotheory even though only the latest belongs to the era of autotheory. In the remainder of this chapter, I would like to look at what sort of autotheory these books represent and, more specifically, what I have meant by “anecdotal theory” and how it compares and contrasts with autotheory.

Let us start with what is perhaps the most obvious difference between the two terms: “autotheory” is one word, “anecdotal theory” two. “Autotheory” is a neologism; “anecdotal theory” is a phrase with two known words, the adjective modifying the noun. Autotheory signifies something hybrid, not quite theory but not quite autobiography, while anecdotal theory is a type of, a subset of, theory. And, finally, while autotheory would locate itself between theory and something else, something *auto*, anecdotal theory is meant to operate within the realm of theory.

In keeping perhaps with this location *within* theory, all my books of anecdotal theory were published by university presses. They may in some ways be experimental, but they remain academic books. Although scholars of autotheory assert that it can be an academic practice, most of the books typically cited as

autotheory are not published by academic presses, even when their authors teach at universities. Although theory itself is far from a strictly academic practice, I see the academic location of anecdotal theory as related to its project to locate its experiment *within and not outside* the recognizable domain of theory. Anecdotal theory, in short, is meant to be not just a mode of writing but a form of knowledge production.

In the conclusion to *Anecdotal Theory*, I wrote, “Bringing the essays together as a book, I have wanted to emphasize [...] the method of theorizing, the practice that I’m calling anecdotal theory.”¹⁸ Seventeen years later, in the introduction to my *Sexuality, Disability, and Aging* (2019), I wrote that “it was this particular practice, this method of theorizing, that I wanted to indicate by the title *Anecdotal Theory*” and that my new book “shares its methodology.”¹⁹

Anecdotal Theory and *Sexuality, Disability, and Aging* are the only two books in which I actually use the phrase “anecdotal theory.” The more recent of these explicitly refers back to the former, saying that it “shares its methodology,” using that very academic word. We might also note that this same academic word also makes an appearance in *Living with His Camera*. The passage I quoted earlier about how that book “combines theory with memoir” (the passage that credits Barthes as the model for my combining theory with memoir) appears in something *Living* calls a “A Methodological Preface.”

Whereas autotheory may be a “new kind of writing,” anecdotal theory is a “methodology.” Or, as I say both in 2002 and in 2019, the practice that I am calling “anecdotal theory” is a “method of theorizing.” In other words, anecdotal theory *is* theory, but with a particular method—theorizing via the use of anecdotes.

Here is how I explained this methodology in 2002: “During the nineties I experimented with writing in which I would re-

18 Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (Duke University Press, 2002), 161.

19 Jane Gallop, *Sexuality, Disability, and Aging* (Duke University Press, 2019), 26.

count an anecdote and then attempt to ‘read’ that account for the theoretical insights it afforded. It is this particular practice of theorizing that I want to indicate by the title *Anecdotal Theory*.²⁰ And here is how I explained the methodology of my 2019 book:

The book that follows is made up of two chapters, both of which begin with a short personal narrative that I wrote especially for this book. [...] This personal writing functions here as catalyst and focus for an extended critical and theoretical inquiry, delving into related issues and texts. This procedure, starting from personal narrative in order to theorize, is something I have called, in an earlier book, “anecdotal theory.”²¹

“Starting from personal narrative *in order to theorize*”: The goal here is to theorize; the point of the personal narrative is to serve as “catalyst and focus” for theoretical inquiry. In the introduction to *Anecdotal Theory*, I say that “the anecdotes become interesting [...] for their ability to intervene in contemporary theoretical debates.”²² *Sexuality, Disability, and Aging* recounts how the book originated in an urge to write the personal narrative that begins the first chapter and then comments thus: “Although I felt quite compelled to tell this story, my ultimate goal was not to write memoir, but to use that experience as a starting point to think through the relation between disability and sex.”²³ For anecdotal theory, memoir is not a goal but a starting point. Personal writing here is meant to serve theory, to lead to theory; the point is to do theory, to do better theory.

As a theorist, as someone who cares about theory, values theory, why do anecdotal theory? As part of the explanation, *Sexuality, Disability, and Aging* quotes Cynthia Franklin’s *Academic Lives* (2009), a study of academic memoirs: “Franklin applauds

20 Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory*, 2.

21 Gallop, *Sexuality*, 25–26.

22 Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory*, 2.

23 Gallop, *Sexuality*, 29.

writing that combines memoir with theory,” and she “values memoir for what it can add to theory.”²⁴ In Franklin’s view, “Personal writing can address complexities and contradictions that escape even the most nuanced theoretical formulations.”²⁵

The answer to my question is to supplement these theoretical formulations with personal writing. Anecdotal theory arises as a solution to theoretical shortcomings. Theory needs personal writing in order to address complexities and contradictions, in order to theorize better.

As a method for practicing theory and as a mode of academic writing, anecdotal theory claimed legitimacy by finding precedents in canonical theorists who included personal writing in their theory. The model for *Living* was Barthes, author of “The Death of the Author” and one of the major literary theorists of the twentieth century. Late in his life, in the 1970s, Barthes—who already enjoyed a substantial reputation as a theorist—began to experiment with writing that combined the autobiographical with theory. Because of his well-established credentials as a theorist, his “auto” writing was taken seriously as theory by students of theory in the 1970s and 1980s. Barthes’s book on photography, *Camera Lucida*, provided me with a precedent, made me imagine that the personal viewpoint of my own study of photography might nonetheless count as a scholarly contribution, as theory. (The scene Nelson witnessed in graduate school could suggest that I was wrong about that.)

In the early 1970s, I was a doctoral student in French. As part of my studies, I went to Paris. While there, I sporadically attended a seminar Barthes offered for American graduate students where he was reading selections from his current work, which would in fact become the autotheoretical book *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. I remember being quite surprised by and even skeptical of his work’s personal focus. I did not really understand what he was doing and why it was theory, but

²⁴ Ibid., 26–27.

²⁵ Cynthia Franklin, *Academic Lives: Memoir, Cultural Theory, and the University Today* (University of Georgia Press, 2009), 24.

his reputation in 1974 was such that we graduate students kept attending the seminar, trying to figure out the point of this autobiographical writing Barthes was doing. Remembering my skeptical graduate-student reaction to Barthes's autotheory strikes me now as ironic indeed.

In addition to Barthes's seminar, I also attended seminars by the two Jacques, Lacan and Derrida. That these were the three courses I chose to attend while a graduate student in Paris bespeaks the centrality of *theory* to my academic training. A quarter century later, when I began to experiment with including personal writing in theory, my understanding of theory was shaped by my academic training in the 1970s—that is, by my readings in poststructuralism. And poststructuralism, as I understood it, provided me not only a model in Barthes's late work but also theoretical justification for breaking down the binary between theory and anecdote.

In short, the *theory* part of *anecdotal theory* functions as a reference to what in the late twentieth century we called “French theory” or just “theory”; it functions as an allusion to poststructuralist thought. I am not sure if the *theory* in the twenty-first-century moniker *autotheory* has the same connotations or not.

The model for *Living* was Barthes, but the book I published one year earlier, *Anecdotal Theory*, derived its theoretical justification from a somewhat different wing of poststructuralism, which could be represented by the other seminars I attended in Paris. *Anecdotal Theory* explicitly names deconstruction and psychoanalysis as sources for anecdotal theory. Those two schools of theory certainly have different histories and different valences, but in 1974, in the heyday of French theory, they seemed completely intertwined, at least to this eager student of theory. Derrida at the moment was involved in giving a deconstructive twist to psychoanalysis; Lacan was being absorbed as part of a poststructuralist and deconstructive canon by those of us studying theory in the United States.

By 2019, although I no longer mentioned deconstruction, I once again listed psychoanalysis as a model for anecdotal theory. *Anecdotal Theory* (2002) might have cited deconstruc-

tion and psychoanalysis as ways to legitimate my experimental methodology, but by 2019 both deconstruction and psychoanalysis were by and large theoretically out-of-date. If I still listed psychoanalysis in 2019 as a model, it was not so much to legitimate anecdotal theory as, on the contrary, to use autotheory to make psychoanalysis relevant again.

In 2002, I wrote that “[a]t its least normative, at its best, psychoanalysis is an anecdotal theory: by grounding theory in case history, psychoanalysis demands that theory test itself against the uncanny details of story.”²⁶ Nearly twenty years later, I quoted this sentence in the introduction to my *Sexuality* and then added the following: “This may be what I most value about what I call anecdotal theory: that by beginning in case history, theorizing must honor and answer to the detail of lived experience.”²⁷ This “least normative” psychoanalysis is, to be sure, a poststructuralist psychoanalysis.

Poststructuralism was not the only theoretical source for *Anecdotal Theory*, which specifically locates itself at the intersection of poststructuralism and feminism. And if poststructuralism is there to lend academic legitimacy to my experiment, so in fact is feminism. One might be tempted to contrast poststructuralism as academic with feminism as something outside of academia, but that is not at all the case.

Here is how *Sexuality* describes the relation of anecdotal theory to feminism:

The idea of combining personal writing with theoretical inquiry came to me, first of all, from feminist studies. Since the beginning of the movement for women’s studies, feminist academics have criticized the way a certain professionalization of knowledge denied connections between knowledge and the world. [...] The inclusion of the personal within the scholarly was seen by some of the pioneers of academic femi-

²⁶ Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory*, 11.

²⁷ Gallop, *Sexuality*, 27.

nism as a way to consider thoughts, responses, and insights that would not traditionally be recognized as knowledge.²⁸

I want to draw attention to the following phrases in this passage: “feminist studies,” “feminist academics,” “academic feminism,” and “women’s studies.” Although I do cite a “movement” here, it is “the movement for women’s studies.” I am here referring not to the broad social movement we call feminism but to something inside academia.

Two decades into the twenty-first century, trying to write about feminism as a theoretical source for anecdotal theory, as someone who was involved in the early days of women’s studies, I find myself referring back to those early days. I took my first women’s studies course in 1971; as an undergraduate, I was on the committee to establish a Women Studies program at my university. Feminist studies had already profoundly influenced me by the time I encountered poststructuralism, by the time I went to Paris in 1974. Like most young women of my generation, I was of course deeply touched and irrevocably shaped by feminism as a social and cultural movement, but the feminism that I consider a theoretical source for anecdotal theory is specifically *academic feminism*.

Both in 2002 and in 2019, as I have been trying to delineate here, I cited poststructuralism and feminism as the theoretical sources for anecdotal theory. By 2019, however, there was an additional theoretical source, an important new influence, one that was not around in the twentieth century. “In the early 2000s,” I wrote in the introduction to *Sexuality* that “reading in queer theory led me into some radical crip theory.” “Reading in crip theory,” I further explained, “I rediscovered anecdotal theory. Scholarly publications at the intersection of queer theory and disability regularly included personal narrative among the theoretical work.”²⁹

²⁸ Ibid., 26.

²⁹ Ibid., 28.

In 2002, I justified my experiment in anecdotal theory by referring back to theories I encountered when first becoming an academic writer. My attempt to practice anecdotal theory twenty years later, however, justified itself by referring to a current theory, one that did not exist as such in 2002. Scholarly work at the intersection of queer and disability took off in the early 2000s and was dubbed “crip theory” by Robert McRuer in 2006. It was this twenty-first-century writing that I appealed to in order to legitimate anecdotal theory in 2019.

You will note that in the passage just quoted about crip theory, I refer to the inclusion of “personal narrative among the theoretical work” in “*scholarly* publications.” My reference to crip theory, however radical intellectually, underpinned anecdotal theory as an academic writing practice. While my latest attempt at anecdotal theory has sources that differ from those of my turn-of-the-century attempts, influences that go beyond my twentieth-century academic training into the twenty-first century, crip theory shares with those earlier sources the fact of being an experimental mode of academic writing.

All the various types of theory taken as legitimating sources for anecdotal theory — from Barthes to the movement for women’s studies to crip theory — are, without exception, modes of academic practice. So, my first answer to the question “What is the relation of anecdotal theory to autotheory?” is this: Anecdotal theory is a practice of autotheory *within* academic writing. Whereas autotheory includes a wide range of practices, from experimental literature to academic monograph, anecdotal theory covers only the part of this range that can qualify as academic writing.

* * *

As an academic mode of autotheory, anecdotal theory is thus a subset, a subgenre, smaller than autotheory, but there is also a way in which anecdotal theory may in fact be larger than autotheory. Three of my books that practice anecdotal theory, though they may be academic books, can comfortably be categorized

under the rubric of autotheory: *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment*, *Living with His Camera*, and *Sexuality, Disability, and Aging* all definitely belong under the rubric of autotheory. But the book actually titled *Anecdotal Theory* is in fact not *strictly* autotheory; while that 2002 book undoubtedly has autotheory within, it also has more than autotheory.

Anecdotal Theory is a collection of essays that I wrote in the 1990s. And although a number of those essays are what we now call autotheory, two of the essays are based in “anecdotes that come from someone else’s life rather than my own.” These essays are clearly *anecdotal* theory (I start from an anecdote and “attempt to ‘read’ that account for the theoretical insights it affords”), but they are *not* autotheory.

As I said in 2002, these essays that begin with anecdotes from someone else’s life “open anecdotal theory beyond the closed circuit of individual life and mind” and “suggest a transindividual model for anecdotal theory.”³⁰ In my subsequent writing, my anecdotal theory in fact restricted itself to autotheory, but looking back at *Anecdotal Theory*, I can see that it might be good to move beyond the auto to a method that uses not just one’s own but other people’s anecdotes.

Since that is not the road I in fact followed after the 1990s, I can here only begin to sketch a bit of its direction.

Let us return to the 2020 article by Jagose and Wallace with which I began. This article where I first encountered autotheory expresses discomfort with the genre’s emphasis on self. For example, in their footnote about *Sexuality, Disability, and Aging*, they write that “the autotheoretical imperative lodged within Gallop’s [...] approach tends to shoulder out the other.”³¹ This is actually pretty damning (and it stung when I first read it). However, the target here is not my writing specifically but “the autotheoretical imperative.” The generic problem with the autotheoretical is a problem with the overly expansive self, a problem of too much self and not enough other.

³⁰ Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory*, 21.

³¹ Jagose and Wallace, “Dicktation,” 135n4.

In fact, Jagose and Wallace's take on autotheory is dotted with expressions of their distaste for this excess of self in the genre. Citing the moment that Nelson writes "I stood with Gallop," Jagose and Lee make the following comment: "Thus the autotheoretical slips the barricade of the self [...] to join the expanded sociality of the sisterhood."³² Their phrasing here suggests that by and large "the autotheoretical" is trapped within, contained by, "the barricade of the self," and that does not sound like a good thing. But this sentence also points to a way out, a way the autotheoretical could "slip the barricade of the self."

Their phrasing here reminds me of what I said in 2002 about the essays whose anecdotes come from someone else's life rather than my own, that this move "opens anecdotal theory beyond the closed circuit of individual life and mind." My "closed circuit of individual life and mind" sounds like Jagose and Wallace's "barricade of the self" — both are enclosures one would want to get out of. When they see Nelson slip the barricade, she joins sociality. When *Anecdotal Theory* discusses what happens when the book gets beyond the auto, it portrays something we could in fact call *sociality*.

Talking about one of the non-auto anecdotal theory essays in my book, "Resisting Reasonableness," I wrote the following:

The story that gives rise to the theorizing in this essay does not [...] come from my own life; it is a story confided to me by someone [...]. Basing its theory in a story confided to me, this essay is rooted not just in personal experience but in personal conversation. Many personal conversations are sites of anecdotal theorizing: friends and confidantes exchange stories from our lives and together try to make sense of them. "Resisting Reasonableness" attempts to bring this mode of intimate and intersubjective knowledge production into the academic realm of formal thinking and legitimated knowledge.³³

³² Ibid., 120.

³³ Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory*, 20.

Friends and confidantes, personal conversation, intersubjective knowledge production — we might indeed call this *sociality*. In 2002, I called this “a transindividual model for anecdotal theory.”

At the very end of *Anecdotal Theory*, I returned to this idea of conversation: “I’ve chosen to end this book by putting my writing in conversation with Nancy Miller.” “I would like *Anecdotal Theory* to have the range of my conversations with Nancy,” I explained. Thus, “I put *Anecdotal Theory* in dialogue with Miller’s *Getting Personal* here because what I mean by ‘my conversations with Nancy’ is not just [our literal conversations] but our books and essays.”³⁴

I closed *Anecdotal Theory* by explicitly putting it in dialogue with a book by a personal friend. She too, as Fournier notes, was attempting in the late twentieth century to do academic writing that included the personal. The idea of conversation with a friend was meant to include both our personal conversations and our published work. I wanted to cross the line between the social and the academic, to bring sociality into theory.

The sociality I gestured to at the end of *Anecdotal Theory* was not meant to be a closed circuit between Nancy and me. Talking about the title essay from Miller’s *Getting Personal* (1991), I said, “‘Getting Personal’ reads and responds to other critics’ personal writing, setting them in dialogue with each other, a dialogue which passes seamlessly between anecdote and theorizing. As if Nancy had hosted a get-together of intellectual colleagues, the effect is to create in writing something like a social space.”³⁵

Praising Miller’s essay, I noted that it puts various critics “in dialogue,” that it “passes seamlessly between anecdote and theorizing,” and that it “creates in writing something like a social space.” I find here in Miller’s essay an example of anecdotal theory, which, even as it brings the personal into academic writing, slips the barricade of the self to join the expanded sociality of the sisterhood.

³⁴ Ibid., 162.

³⁵ Ibid., 163–64.

Anecdotal Theory thus ends by taking Nancy Miller as a model, not for auttheory but for an anecdotal theory that is transindividual, embedded in sociality. And thus, via Miller's essay "Getting Personal," I got to the very last sentences of the book I titled *Anecdotal Theory*, where I proclaimed, "Abstract, disembodied theory [...] dreams of being the last word. [...] [A]necdotal theory [...] speaks with the desire for a response."³⁶ The difference between the two, as expressed here, is that whereas the former theory dreams of no response, of reducing the other to silence, the latter theory is *in conversation*.

This is literally where *Anecdotal Theory* ends—by moving beyond the closed circuit of individual life and mind to a transindividual model for anecdotal theory. Unfortunately, I never followed up on this. All of my subsequent attempts at anecdotal theory remained within the auttheoretical.

But if, like Jagose and Wallace, some of us find ourselves troubled by the excess of self in auttheory, we might want to take another look at this path not followed, at transindividual anecdotal theory. That might allow us to continue the liberating experiment of breaking down the boundary between theory and personal story, minus the baggage of too much self.

³⁶ Ibid., 164.

Bibliography

- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. Hill and Wang, 2020.
- . *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Translated by Richard Howard. Vintage, 2020.
- Fournier, Lauren. *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. MIT Press, 2021.
- Gallop, Jane. *Anecdotal Theory*. Duke University Press, 2002.
- . *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment*. Duke University Press, 1997.
- . *Living with His Camera*. Duke University Press, 2003.
- . *Sexuality, Disability, and Aging*. Duke University Press, 2019.
- Jagose, Annamarie, and Lee Wallace. “Dicktion: Autotheory in the Coupled Voice.” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 76, no. 1 (2020): 109–39. DOI: 10.1353/arq.2020.0004.
- Kraus, Chris. *I Love Dick*. Semiotext(e), 2006.
- Miller, Nancy K. *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*. Routledge, 1991.
- Nelson, Maggie. *The Argonauts*. Gray Wolf Press, 2015.
- Wiegman, Robyn. “Introduction: Autotheory Theory.” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 76, no. 1 (2020): 1–14. DOI: 10.1353/arq.2020.0009.

The Dialectics of Friendship: A Work of *Dialogia-Theoria* in Letters

Eric Daffron and Becky McLaughlin

Hey, B.,

Joanna Walsh has recently innovated my daily routine. A few years ago, she conducted a cool experiment called *#theoryplushouseworktheory!* The project “involve[d] carrying out a household or personal care task while reading[,] listening to, or watching works relating to theory and theorists that are freely available online.”¹

I replicated Walsh’s experiment the other afternoon. While I was cleaning the bathroom, I listened to “Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Guide of Gender Variance,” a video on Jack Halberstam’s recent book.² The video runs almost an hour and a half, but I needed only fifteen minutes to clean the bathroom. Thus, I began with a built-in constraint, one made worse when I forgot

¹ Joanna Walsh, *#theoryplushouseworktheory!* (If a Leaf Falls Press, 2019).

² NYU Florence, “Jack Halberstam — Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Guide to Gender Variance,” *YouTube*, March 28, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvWUlus6ao>.

to hit "Play" until a few minutes into my regime. In addition, running water in one room while listening to a video playing in another room compromised my ability to hear and follow the lecture. Despite those limitations, I learned a lot about the asterisk in the book's title, a marker for the open field of gender diversity. I was even tempted to apply Halberstam's insights to a cleaning mishap. Before I started cleaning, the shower caddy was impeccably organized and symmetrically balanced with my shaving cream on one side and my moisturizer on the other. While cleaning one side of the tub, I accidentally knocked the organizer with the shower curtain. My razor flew off and, with it, the blade. I wasn't too disappointed, however. For I considered the resulting imbalance and disarray a kind of quotidian queering, a fitting emblem for any of us willing to accept that our gender and sexuality will never live up to our culture's tidy, dichotomous expectations.

Forgive me if I'm pushing that metaphor too far.

Eric

Dear E(ric),

When I reached the end of your most recent missive, I nearly gasped, for you had not signed off in your habitual manner. I've become so accustomed to your identity as "E" in our email intercourse that seeing the name I call you when we interact in person was quite startling. Do you think that B and E are the same as Becky and Eric? Obviously, there's a close relation between the two pairs, but I don't believe they are synonymous. And, thus, to have you sign off as "Eric" was almost like encountering an interloper. (Funny that you could be viewed as an interloper in a missive that you yourself have written, eh?)

Yours as always,

B.

Dear B.,

It would be all too easy for me to brush aside my last sign-off as an accident, but you would never accept that excuse. For, as a diehard Lacanian, you would undoubtedly attribute my slip of the “pen” to the unconscious. If I were to entertain your claim even for a moment, I would suggest that, as satisfied as I am with my textual persona and our epistolary correspondence, I still yearn for the intimacy that my other persona affords. Thus, when “Eric” arrives on the scene with no invitation, don’t dismiss him as an interloper. He’s only a visitor, strange but familiar.

Yours as always,

E

Dear E,

When you say that you yearn for the intimacy your other persona affords, I’m not sure what you mean. Is it the case that “Eric” feels a bit left out when B and E are corresponding? If so, I will waive the need for an invitation to our colloquy and welcome him with open arms. Although you’re too polite to say so, I was being histrionic in reacting to your allo-appellation as if it were an interloper.

Having used the word “interloper” in my previous missive, a word you echoed in yours, I now find myself curious about its etymology. Upon looking it up in the *OED*, I discovered that the history of the word is somewhat obscure, the earliest examples belonging to the end of the sixteenth century. What is most interesting to me, however, is the fact that no form or cognate of the word “interlope” (“inter” + “lope,” a dialect form of “leap”) existed in any other language until after 1700. Around 1600, *interlopers*, *intermeddlers*, *stragglers*, and *straggling Englishmen* were used synonymously, and, the *OED* states, these synonyms suggest a connection with the word “land-loper” (i.e., vagabond,

vagrant, or straggler), which replaced the earlier word “land-leaper.” I did not mean to call “Eric” a vagrant(!), but, knowing how much he loves to travel, perhaps the word “land-leaper” is a fitting discovery. Would you mind awfully if I began to call him, in the most affectionate manner possible, my land-leaping Eric?

Yours as always,

B.

Dear B.,

You’re welcome to call Eric or E a land-leaper any time you want to do so. I’m actually warming up to the appellation.

When I wrote that “I still yearn for the intimacy that my other persona affords,” I indulged in a facile distinction between writing and speech: between E (who engages with you in epistolary correspondence) and Eric (who emerges during our in-person conversations). Considering my Derridean upbringing, I should know better. Forgive my theoretical lapse in judgment. And yet, I confess that I do miss the intimacy of face-to-face exchange even if our written correspondence admittedly bears its own sort of familiarity.

Yours,

E

My dear Land-Leaping E,

I want to return to Walsh’s housework experiment, which reminds me of Anna O’s name for the storytelling she engaged in during her treatment by Joseph Breuer: “chimney-sweeping.”³ Although many metaphors have been used to suggest the work

3 Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, *Studies in Hysteria*, trans. Nicola Luckhurst (Penguin, 2004), 34.

of psychoanalysis — the theatrical and the surgical two of the most popular — the one I find most compelling is Anna O's, probably because it is both humorous and humble. And, as Rachel Bowlby points out in her introduction to Adam Phillips's edition of *Studies in Hysteria*, the metaphor of chimney-sweeping "associates the talking cure with routine, daily life, necessary household work. Like all domestic tasks, chimney-sweeping is never finally done."⁴ Don't you think, E, that the metaphor of psychoanalysis as ongoing housework or homework dovetails nicely with your reading of the bungled action involving the shower curtain and caddy, an action that, in your view, led to a felicitous lack of symmetry among your toiletries? (By the way, just as one can seldom overdose on garlic, one can seldom push a metaphor too far, as we have learned from the seventeenth century's metaphysical poets.)

Yours as always,

B.

Hey, B.,

Since my theoretically informed bathtub scrubbing resonated for you, you might get a kick out of my most recent replication of Walsh's experiment. Last weekend, instead of cleaning the apartment, I worked out at the gym while listening to "L'écriture fragmentée," part of a late 1970s interview with Roland Barthes.⁵ How wonderful to listen to Barthes's voice as I burned fat and flexed muscles! Listening to that clip while working out my back delts and legs, I was reminded that Barthes liked interruption. And so, in that spirit, I interrupted him as I hit the stop button

4 Rachel Bowlby, "Introduction: Never Done, Never to Return," in *Studies in Hysteria*, ed. Adam Phillips (Penguin, 2004), vii–xxxiii.

5 Bernard-Henri Lévy & Jacques Chancel — Topic, "L'écriture fragmentée," *YouTube*, November 5, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZ2YZVu_GTI.

at the end of my workout, leaving the rest of the interview for a future occasion.

Yours,

E

Dear E,

Your experiment at the gym reminds me of Matthew Barney's *Drawing Restraint* series. In this series, Barney coupled the process of drawing with some form of physical restraint or obstacle. In *Drawing Restraint 6*, Barney used a trampoline to catapult himself into the air so that he could make marks on the ceiling in an attempt to draw a self-portrait. Listening to Barthes may not be the equivalent of drawing a self-portrait, and, yet, I can't help thinking that in listening to Barthes while sculpting your back delts and legs, you were engaging in a performance at once corporeal and intellectual, one that resulted in a metamorphosis not only of the body but also of Barthes's words themselves. And Barthes would surely have approved of this experiment, for your listening practice could be referred to as "manual, muscular, [and] kneadingly physical,"⁶ the trio of words Barthes uses in "Musica Practica" to describe a type of piano playing that has disappeared.

Do all roads lead to Barthes?

Yours as always,

B.

6 Roland Barthes, "Musica Practica," in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Hill and Wang, 1977), 150.

Dear B.,

I love the comparison with Barney, but I think it works only up to a point. It's true that Barney and I are both engaged in a physical activity while performing an artistic one or listening to an intellectual one. But whereas Barney's physical activity is a restraint, mine is a relation. For, though Walsh never says as much explicitly, I can't help thinking she executed her farfetched experiments to demonstrate that the theoretical can enter the quotidian world. In fact, I can gloss her experiments and my replications with the phrase "everyday theory," the title of the textbook you published with a colleague.⁷ Indeed, one of your textbook's greatest insights is that theory can illuminate everyday situations while the quotidian can inspire theoretical ruminations.

Even if I quibble just a bit with your comparison, I'll never pass up a reference to Barthes. Yes, indeed, all roads lead to him. Just as the amateur pianist, known for precisely the attributes you cite, was eventually relegated to the audience, as Barthes argues, the theory student can all too easily retreat to the position of passive reader or listener.⁸ Yet I truly believe that theorists never meant for their musings to remain trapped in a dusty book or a college classroom. They intended for us to live out and try out those very theories. For only in so doing can we live the examined life to which Socrates summoned us all.

Stepping down from my soapbox, I sign this missive with customary affection.

Yours as always,

E

7 Becky McLaughlin and Bob Coleman, eds., *Everyday Theory: A Contemporary Reader* (Pearson Longman, 2005).

8 Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *Image Music Text*, trans. Heath, 162–63.

Dear E,

Your analogy between the amateur pianist and the theory student is quite apt, and Barthes's intellectual acuity comes into play yet again, with his terms "readerly" and "writerly," in helping us to distinguish the passive reader (or listener) from the active. And I appreciate your gesture of approbation toward *Everyday Theory*. In the first line of the textbook's introduction, I concede that "everyday theory" might appear to be a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron, or, at best, a conceit not unlike the one used by John Donne in "The Flea," a poem in which a bloodsucking flea functions as the analogue for a marriage bed or a temple.⁹ But, like you, I relish those moments when the quotidian rubs bellies with the sublime, and, if I mistake you not, I believe as you do that theory is not meant to be applied like lipstick (at least, not routinely) but to be inhabited like skin. Unfortunately, I have received some rather hostile responses to my inhabitation of psychoanalysis, for, on more than one occasion, I have been told to "cut that shit out."

Although I could ramble on—because rambling in the knowledge that you are rambling with me makes it far too pleasurable to stop—I will momentarily "cut this shit out."

Yours as always,

B.

Dear B.,

Don't ever "cut this shit out." And, for that matter, don't listen to anyone who tells you to do so. In fact, your inclination toward impromptu theoretical ruminations contributes to your charm, that irreplaceable certain something that makes you the singular person that you are.

9 John Donne, "The Flea," in *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*, ed. A.J. Smith (Penguin, 1982), 58.

Your metaphor for theorizing is apt. On the one hand, lipstick is an enhancement and a beautification. It may make one more attractive, but it's hardly necessary. On the other hand, skin is fundamental to our existence. It is, after all, our interface with the world. And like your metaphoric bloodsucking and belly rubbing, this conceit partakes of the corporeal, even the sexual. I can't help but think that theory, if inhabited like skin rather than applied like lipstick, can be transformational. In fact, it was Sara Ahmed who wrote, "theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin."¹⁰

Yours as always,

E

Dear B.,

I have just engaged in premature valediction, and thus I write again. Last night I went to bed around 5 p.m. This is not the first time over the last couple of years that I've gone to sleep inordinately early, but this time I outdid myself. As you know, I customarily retire and rise early, but ever since COVID-19 reared its ugly head, I've hit the sack earlier every night. I'm sure a doctor would diagnose me with a mild case of depression, but I'm entertaining a different explanation.

In some of his last interviews, Foucault addressed the impoverishment of our affective relationships. In a world rigorously divided between male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, coupled and uncoupled, we fail to imagine relationships, even makeshift ones, beyond traditional ones. "Homosexuality is a historic occasion," Foucault claimed, "to reopen affective and relational virtualities, not so much through the intrinsic qualities of the homosexual but because the 'slantwise' position of the latter [...], the diagonal lines he can lay out in the social

10 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press, 2017), 10.

fabric allow these virtualities to come to light.”¹¹ The solitary individual suffers the most from our culture’s lack of imagination. “The life of solitude is often the result of the poverty of possible relationships in our society,” Foucault explains, “where institutions make insufficient and necessarily rare all relations that one could have with someone else and could be intense, rich — even if they were provisional — even and especially if they took place outside the framework of marriage.”¹²

You know my amatory disappointments and my reclusive tendencies better than almost anyone else, but I can’t help wondering whether I retire early every night because I have nowhere else to turn but my bed.

Yours,

E

Dear E,

As always, you’ve given me a number of toeholds for continuing to climb our epistolary Mont Blanc. Your discussion of Foucault, for example, has given rise to a memory of one of those moments when the world was impoverished by being “rigorously divided between male and female” and when, upon my attempt to introduce the “virtual,” the “slantwise,” or the “provisional,” I was told to “cut that shit out.” Here was the situation: I was at a party being held in the home of a female colleague, and, at one point, she noted that her guests had segregated themselves into a group of women, who were occupying the back patio, and a group of men, who were occupying the living room. Surveying the group on the back patio, she said, “It’s so nice to have just us *women* here!” Her comment irritated me for

11 Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (The New Press, 1997), 138.

12 Michel Foucault, “The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will,” in *Ethics*, ed. Rabinow, 159.

a number of reasons, one of which was that it suggested my son would be unwelcome if he were to join us. Motivated by a slight sense of pique, I asked, "How do you know we're all sexuated as women?" Do you remember Claire Kahane from SUNY Buffalo? I took her seminar on feminist theory in which she conjectured that every firstborn is a son. And, thus, I may very well be sexuated as a man! In fact, I've always supposed so, for I've never quite grasped what it means to be a woman. It has always felt like a masquerade — something applied like lipstick, not inhabited like skin — and Joan Riviere has come closest to explaining that feeling of alienation in "Womanliness as a Masquerade."¹³ Instead of opening up an interesting line of inquiry, however, my question elicited her immediate and curt demand that I "cut that shit out." Our relationship, as you might surmise, deteriorated after that, and I came to think of her as what I call a "knee-jerk feminist."

Your and my relationship, on the other hand, has grown stronger through our shared interest in how theory operates in everyday life. We seem to have escaped the rigid boundaries Foucault bemoans, and ours is an especially intense and rich friendship built over the course of thirty-four years. Although my life is not solitary in the way yours is, I don't socialize much, and, thus, if you and I ceased writing to each other so regularly, I would feel lonely. In fact, our correspondence is life-sustaining for me.

Meanwhile, I remain yours, as always, for more of "that shit"!

B.

13 Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan (Routledge, 1989), 35–61.

Dear B.,

I, too, find our epistolary correspondence “life-sustaining.” In fact, just this morning, as I was rereading Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, I landed on a sentence that expresses what writing — especially writing with and for you — has become for me. In elucidating the writing to which she aspires, a form of discourse first described in her undergraduate thesis, Nelson explains, with a nod to Judith Butler, “I mean writing that dramatizes the ways in which we are *for another* or *by virtue of another*, not in a single instance, but from the start and always.”¹⁴ I can add nothing more on the subject.

I do, however, have more to say about the rigid gender division to which you and potentially your son were subject. Did I ever share with you my own childhood gender play? The last time you visited me in New York, you probably didn’t notice the picture of me on my desk as a three-year-old, but there was the evidence. Apparently, from the age of two to four, I ransacked the closet of every woman my parents and I visited for shoes. Sporting my new fashion, I strutted out in the open for everyone to see. (At this point, I can only imagine that you’re formulating a Freudian interpretation of my shoe fetish, but all I can say is, “Cut that shit out.” Just joking.) As a benign prank, older cousins often dressed me in women’s dresses and coats with purses and other accoutrements to boot.

What’s strange about my childhood transvestism is that, by kindergarten, I never dressed in women’s clothes again. Why my cross-dressing flourished at a very young age and then came to a decisive end, I’ll never know for certain, but I’ll venture one theory. As a youngster, I was exposed to our culture’s expectations of masculinity and femininity but not fully subjected to them. Thus, with my cousins’ playful encouragement, I freely explored the opposite gender. However, by the time I reached kindergarten, I succumbed to gender tyranny, an insidious form of discipline that only increased as I approached adolescence

14 Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Graywolf Press, 2015), 60.

and manifested telltale signs of same-sex attraction. Of course, I'll never win a prize for my everyday presentation of masculinity. Nevertheless, nowadays, I seldom fail to pass as a man.

In closing, I resist any comparison of our correspondence to Mont Blanc. For I harbor a sheer terror of heights. If our correspondence — our movement from self to other — is anything like the suspension bridge that I once attempted to cross in Vancouver, I may never write you again. (Just joking — kind of.)

Yours,

Eric

My dear E,

You've signed off again with your full name (a repetition that is certainly no accident), but this time it is less startling than it was before. In pondering why the name in this particular context draws attention to itself in a way that it would not in another, I've come up with two theories: (1) Using the initials B and E is an inside joke that only you and I are privy to, and when you use your full name, it turns the joke inside out, and (2) alternatively, but also interrelatedly, our alter egos, B and E, seem like masked figures behind which stand Becky and Eric, and when you use your full name, it feels like a moment in which you have unmasked yourself and, by association, me. Obviously, I do not mind being unmasked, but it is nevertheless a little alarming. Apropos of Maggie Nelson: Might it be the case that the inside joke dramatizes the way in which we are *for another*, while the alter ego dramatizes the way in which we are *by virtue of another*?

I was taken completely by surprise when you reacted as you did to my comparison of our correspondence to Mont Blanc! On the one hand, my surprise was cause for pleasure, for to be reminded that, despite our long friendship, there are still things about you I do not know brings me delight. On the other hand, my surprise was cause for unpleasure, for to cause you distress

through my ignorance distresses me. My unfortunate comparison arose because I've been teaching the Romantics, and so objects of the sublime, such as Mont Blanc, have been on my mind. What's odd is that you have never discussed with me your fear of heights, nor I mine with you.

Would you mind narrating your attempt to cross the suspension bridge in Vancouver? Though I do not like the reality of heights, I am always up for what SUNY professor Henry Sussman used to call the "chickenshit sublime," by which I believe he meant an encounter with the sublime via art — that is, an encounter with the sublime from a position of safety.

Yours as always,

B.

Dear B.,

A few epistles ago, you wrote, "Cut that shit out." Never content with just one scatological reference, you had to add to it "chickenshit sublime." At least you dignified the phrase by invoking the esteemed Henry Sussman.

The story of my terrifying waltz across the suspension bridge actually began the night before. For some reason, I was on a tear, crawling from one gay nightclub to the next. The morning after, I woke up hungover but still determined to go to a park outside the Vancouver city center. What I didn't know was that to travel from the bus stop to the park entrance, I was obliged to cross a bridge suspended hundreds of feet above a body of water. At first, I was excited, having never seen a suspension bridge. However, once I started walking across it, I was overcome with sheer horror. Although, rationally speaking, I had no reason to think I would fall, the bridge's rocking motion made me feel otherwise. A sick stomach and a pounding headache didn't help matters. What made the situation worse was that I couldn't return to the bus without walking across the bridge. Suffice it to say that I've never again crossed a suspension bridge.

Our shared fear of heights has prompted me to refine my thoughts on the sublime. In Gothic courses, I routinely offer my students two contrasting scenarios to help them understand the concept. Imagine, I tell them, a man perched on top of a mountain, looking across the vast expanse below and above him. Many artists and writers have depicted the same. As long as the man remains one step removed from impending danger, he enjoys an awe-inspiring experience. But if he were to take even one reckless step forward, he would fall to his demise. The first scenario is sublime; the second, death.¹⁵ However, my anecdote suggests a third scenario: A man who, before an otherwise awe-some scene, is completely terrified. Thus, I wonder whether, in addition to the traditional sublime and the chickenshit sublime, there is a third manifestation: the scared-shitless sublime.

Yours,

E

Dear E,

Do you consider “horror” and “terror” synonyms? After having read James Twitchell’s *Dreadful Pleasures*, I do not. In his book, he makes an interesting distinction between the two words. Based on the Latin word *horrēre*, the word “horror” refers to fear that has no known cause and thus no identifiable beginning or ending point. This type of fear is circular. Based on the Latin word *terrēre*, the word “terror,” on the other hand, refers to fear that has a known cause and thus an identifiable beginning and ending point. This type of fear is linear.¹⁶ Do you buy this distinction, and do you think Burke would?

15 I base these contrasting scenarios on Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford University Press, 1990), 36–37, 47.

16 James B. Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 10–11.

Your experience of the scared-shitless sublime gives rise to many questions: If you had been observed, would your fear have been apparent, or were you able to mask it? Were you, in fact, alone on the bridge, and, if so, did that exacerbate your fear? And how would you describe the feeling (both physical and mental) of being scared shitless? Did you have a sense of panic? Did you feel paralyzed, weak in the knees, or breathless? Did your head feel foggy or clear? The reason I ask is because I have two different versions of being scared shitless: the panic-inducing type, which makes me feel weak and mentally deranged, and the fight-or-flight type, which makes me feel strong and mentally clear-headed. If I were to try to generalize about what brings on these two different types of fear, I'd say that the panic-inducing type is brought on by the feeling of the sublime as Schopenhauer describes it — that is, the feeling that arises when the object at hand (the Rocky Mountains, for example) does not invite contemplation but is instead a vast, malignant object of such magnitude that it defies reckoning with. The other type of fear is brought on by objects that have human dimensions associated with the quotidian — for example, a man pointing a gun at me.

As you know, I have suffered panic attacks on and off since 1986 when I first went to China. Its immense population coupled with its vast distance from home created a sense of suffocation in me accompanied by an occasional feeling of panic. In fact, panic was never far from erupting during the two years that I lived there, but I found ways to manage it so that I wasn't crippled by it. If you want a sense of how cutoff I felt from the rest of the world, I can only compare it to what the young Ukrainian supercaver Emil Vash experienced after joining the expedition to find the deepest cave on Earth. Rappelling down the yawning pits of Krubera Cave (one of which was 500 feet deep) and wiggling through excruciatingly tight passages called "meanders," Vash finally made it to camp at 1,400 meters below the surface only to find that in order to descend to the next camp at 1,840 meters, he would be forced to traverse a short

but hazardous tunnel flooded with very cold water.¹⁷ The tunnel was only ten feet long, but it was just eighteen inches wide. Can you imagine trying to swim through such a tunnel while holding your breath? I don't know if you've ever heard of what supercavers call "the Rapture," but it describes in uncanny detail exactly how I felt when I was having a full-blown panic attack. According to James Tabor, author of *Blind Descent*, "the Rapture" is an extremely unpleasant reaction to darkness and depth akin to a panic attack on meth.¹⁸ The problem with this type of panic is that, even if it is brought on by something external, it is experienced internally, and, thus, you can't be rescued from its clutches by anyone other than yourself. You are basically buried alive in your own head.

On that happy note, I shall sign off.

Yours as always,

B.

Dear B.,

Any die-hard fan of the inimitable novelist Ann Radcliff would maintain a difference between horror and terror, but rather than entertain that distinction, I will address an interesting pattern across your last two epistles. In the first, you asked me to narrate my harrowing experience crossing the suspension bridge. I dutifully responded to your request. Then, in the second, you asked me, once again, to tell my story, posing a litany of questions. Considering your penchant for psychoanalysis, I suspect you remember what Freud said about questions. According to Barthes, who recently drew my attention to the matter, "every question is indiscreet, it is [...] inquiry about the sexuality of the

¹⁷ James Tabor, *Blind Descent: The Quest to Discover the Deepest Place on Earth* (Random House, 2011), 233–40.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

other.” It leads, in short, to “coerced exhibitionism.”¹⁹ Are your insistent questions a stratagem to induce me to expose myself?

Regardless of your intention, I’ll oblige you again. My experience comes closer to your first form of the scared-shitless sublime. As I crossed the bridge, I panicked so much that I could hardly move across. And yet, I knew I had to make it to the other side. Thus, with my eyes barely open to avoid the vast expanse below me, I walked gingerly across. Making matters worse, other pedestrians were simultaneously crossing the bridge in both directions. As a result, the bridge swayed back and forth, increasing my panic. I have no idea if my fellow travelers across the bridge noticed my condition. I was too absorbed in my own fear to pay much attention.

It’s worth noting, in light of our shared response to the scared-shitless sublime, that, for Barthes, “every question sets off a certain panic.”²⁰ To combat the “terrorism of the question,” he enumerated a set of “beside-the-point answers,” such as silence, flight, and derailment.²¹ All of them play a role in his larger theory of the “Neutral.” Barthes defined that term as “everything that baffles the paradigm,” which he elucidated, in turn, as “the opposition of two virtual terms.” Indeed, “meaning rests on conflict.” In contrast, the Neutral strives for “conflict avoidance.”²² Of course, your questions don’t instill in me panic, nor do they require “beside-the-point answers.” But they nonetheless remind me of a recent incident in which I practiced “conflict avoidance.”

Most New Yorkers don’t think of a neighborhood pizza parlor as a potential site of conflict, but so it was for me the other night. Craving a snack, I dashed to the corner pizza joint. When I reached the counter, the cook asked me what I wanted. “Two slices,” I responded. Although I’ve lived in the City almost a decade, no one has ever explained to me that the phrase “two slices”

19 Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (Columbia University Press, 2005), 108.

20 Ibid., 107.

21 Ibid., 107, 109–14.

22 Ibid., 6–7.

is shorthand for “two slices of cheese pizza.” Thus, instead of giving me an opportunity to select my slices, as this establishment’s other employees have done many times in the past, the cook put two slices of cheese pizza in the oven. After a few minutes passed, I impatiently asked if he was going to fill my order. When he explained what he had done, I told him I didn’t want cheese pizza. Then ensued an argument, one for which I had neither the time nor the desire. So, I turned taciturn. I mumbled only a sufficient number of phrases to move the transaction swiftly from pizza to payment. As I exited the scene, I heard the cook praising the next customer for ordering *his* slices correctly.

Although it may at first seem banal, the pizza-joint incident is actually a good example of the Neutral. Barthes explains that “everything in the universe, in the world, in society, in the subject, in reality is formatted by conflict.”²³ One way to avoid conflict is to go silent. Of all the forms of silence that Barthes enumerates, mine came closest to silence as “nonreply” or, I would add, as nonengagement.²⁴ Yet this strategy poses problems. Silence can easily become a sign, one that can, in turn, be subsumed by a paradigm (e.g., silent and talkative).²⁵ To unsettle that paradigm, Barthes recommends “the minimal expenditure of a speech act.”²⁶ Thus, in responding minimally to the cook, I avoided conflict while attaining the Neutral.

Exit silence, as Barthes would say.

Yours as always,

E

23 Ibid., 125.

24 Ibid., 109.

25 Ibid., 26–27.

26 Ibid., 27.

Dear E,

Your question regarding my motive for asking you questions — “Are your insistent questions simply a stratagem to get me to expose myself?” — is an interesting one. The simple answer is yes, because I am always keen on getting you to expose yourself. Although what is popularly (and wrongly) called the “sex drive” may lessen in intensity over the years, I’m not convinced that the scopophilic drive ever does. This, then, gives rise to another question: Do you remember being eager to see other children’s genitals when you were a child? I certainly do! For example, there was a young neighbor boy who used to visit my family occasionally, and when I discovered that he had a hole in the crotch of his pants, I encouraged him to do summersaults so that I could see his “privates.” (What term do you use? I abhor the term “junk” and find the “family jewels” downright laughable.) I never tired of seeing his flesh peek out of its hole like an inquisitive groundhog peering out of its burrow. Invoking Barthes’s *The Pleasure of the Text*, I suppose that this was one of those moments of the erotic created by “the intermittence of skin flashing [...] between two edges.”²⁷ What seduced me was the flesh as “flash,” or “the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance.”²⁸

The more complex answer is no, for what I’m actually doing is encouraging you to ask me to expose myself. Here’s the logic: If I ask you a question, you may be prompted to reciprocate by asking me the same question in return. There is, you might say, an auto-interrogation lurking behind the allo-interrogation.

Yours as always,

B.

27 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (Hill and Wang, 1975), 10.

28 Ibid.

Dear B.,

The other day, as I was rereading the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, I chuckled out loud. In part one, Foucault quips, “Tomorrow sex will be good again.”²⁹ With tongue in cheek, he’s poking fun at us moderns who subscribe to “the repressive hypothesis” — the culturally entrenched belief that our sexuality has been repressed since at least the Victorian era and that, by simply talking dirty, we make strides toward liberating our sex. Taking that line out of context, I ruefully imagine a future day when my own sex will be good again. After all, by many folks’ standards, I haven’t had real sex in who knows when. Yet one can’t claim that I haven’t been intimate.

Let me explain by way of anecdote. At my gym, a young guy has made his intention demonstratively clear that he would like to have sex with me. I would be happy to oblige, but all he wants is anal sex, though he might take oral sex as a concession. While I enjoy both sexual practices, my current policy is to avoid them for health reasons unless I’m in an established relationship, however defined. Call me a prude if you’d like, but I live in a city in which everyone has sex with everyone else. Yet I don’t feel too deprived. For I believe there’s a wide array of sensual experiences — from massage to frottage — that men can cultivate without gravitating around anal and oral sex. I offered them to my gym buddy as options, but I was summarily dismissed.

To each his own, I suppose. In *The Epistemology of the Closet*, the wise Eve Sedgwick put at the head of her list of axioms the following: “People are different from each other.”³⁰ She went on to enumerate a set of those differences, including this one: “To some people, the nimbus of ‘the sexual’ seems scarcely to extend beyond the boundaries of discrete genital acts; to others, it enfolds them loosely or floats virtually free of them.”³¹ Whereas my

29 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Vintage, 1990), 7.

30 Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (University of California Press, 1990), 22.

31 *Ibid.*, 25.

young admirer clearly subscribes to the belief that only genital sex is real sex, I'm more of a loose enfolder and free floater.

Yours always,

E.

Dear E.,

You are up to something, but I'm not sure what it is or even if it's intentional. For the past several years, you've been signing off as "E" sans period. But now — suddenly — a dot has appeared, looking for all the world like a little ball being kicked by the foot of your E. Perhaps it annoys you when I comment on the way you sign off, especially (or, rather, only) when it deviates from the norm, but I can't help noticing the aberrant. It's my forte, after all. Hehe.

Your nimble leap from the subject of silence to the subject of sex has me wanting to follow suit, but you've opened up the possibility of so many fruitful destinations that I don't know which way to leap. (Carved into the surface of a picnic table in Texas circa 1980: "Look before you leap, and then jump like a son of a bitch.") According to Blanchot, states Barthes in *The Neutral*, "Kafka wondered at what moment and how many times, when eight people are seated within the horizon of a conversation, it is appropriate to speak if one does not wish to be considered silent."³² I have wondered this same thing on occasion and found myself growing hot with embarrassment the longer I've gone without speaking. To remain silent while in company is, it seems to me, to make oneself invisible, but not in a "superpower" sort of way. In fact, I have a deeply ambivalent relationship to and with silence. (If I wrote a book entitled *The History of Silence*, would you read it?) When M. and I used to fight, I would fall silent, for it was the only way to defend myself against his type of verbal attack. Do you remember my artificial mole, which I

³² Barthes, *The Neutral*, 108.

used to wear just beneath the outside corner of my right eye? Upon learning that it was painted on, just as my eyeliner was, M. demanded that I stop wearing it. We fought about it, and I finally caved in. On one occasion, however, I rebelled and wore the mole to class with the intention of wiping it off before returning home. As you can probably guess, I forgot to remove the mole, and when he saw the errant beauty mark, he made a mountain out of a mole(hill), saying something extreme, such as "This is a form of betrayal as bad as if you'd cheated on me." How does one respond to such a histrionic statement except with silence?

Next, "real" sex....

Yours as always,

B.

Dear B.,

If you could sport a mole, one that curiously moved across your face, surely I can sign off with a period after my E. Perhaps you are now the one making a mountain out of a molehill, but at least you're doing so with much more cordiality than M.

Suffice it to say that I look forward to your next missive, the one on sex.

Yours as always,

E(.)

Postscript

Dear B.,

It seems ages since I last had the pleasure of hearing from your pen. Your silence has afforded me the opportunity to reread our past correspondence. As I reviewed our epistles, I was struck at how often one of us prompts the other to propose a theory about

an event or a memory. Then, in return, the former recalls a parallel topic or supplements, comments on, or otherwise qualifies the latter's theorizing. Thus, our exchange suggests that some of the most meaningful theory partakes of a relation.

When I conducted a keyword search on "relation" and its variants, I was further struck at how often we use that word. The paragraph in which it appears most frequently is the one in which I invoke Foucault to speculate about "the impoverishment of [my] affective relationships." A go-to interview on the matter is "The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will," in which Foucault addresses nonmarital relationships, ones that can be makeshift but can still be robust and fulfilling.³³ Our exchange testifies to the validity of Foucault's contention, and our theorizing is an appropriate outgrowth of that relationship.

The survey of our correspondence reminded me of Arianne Zwartjes, who argues that "autotheory engenders collectivist, rather than individualist, worldviews; it uses theory to recognize the power of shared connection, shared experience, in a fragmented and isolated time."³⁴ The most obvious instance of autotheory's relationality is citation. From Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* to Nelson's *The Argonauts*, citations appear prominently in the margins. Commenting on this autotheoretical characteristic, Alex Brostoff calls it "intertextual kinship."³⁵ Brostoff's coinage applies to our brand of theorizing.

I hope you're not dismayed when I confess that I still stand by the original designation for our exchange. I'll take credit for suggesting some months ago that we modernize the Roman Empire-era epistolary correspondence in which one sent advice to the other, often with citations that the former had collected.

33 Foucault, "The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will," 157–62.

34 Arianne Zwartjes, "Under the Skin: An Exploration of Autotheory," *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019), <http://www.essayjournal.com/arianne-zwartjes8203-under-the-skin-an-exploration-of-autotheory-61.html>.

35 Alex Brostoff, "An Autotheory of Intertextual Kinship: Ambivalent Bodies in the Work of Maggie Nelson and Paul B. Preciado," *Synthesis: An Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies* 14 (2021): 91–115.

Foucault called such an exchange “soul service.”³⁶ Though I still find Foucault’s epithet apt, I’ve warmed up to *dialogia-theoria*, your brainchild. When you have a chance, remind me of how you came up with this neologism.

Yours,

E

Dear E,

Yes, it has been far too long since our last exchange, but, as you observe, the prolonged silence has given us time to reflect upon our correspondence in fruitful ways. The first point you make — “some of the most meaningful theory partakes of a relation” — not only bears repeating but also augmentation vis-à-vis an article in *The New Yorker* that makes a similar point, “Agnes Callard’s Marriage of the Minds.” The article tells the story of three philosophy professors at the University of Chicago. Although their relationship is interesting, what is more interesting is the way Agnes philosophizes about it. I was reminded of you and me and what we’re doing with *dialogia-theoria* when I read the following lines: “As [Agnes sees] it, thinking is not something that one person can do alone. It takes two people to have a thought.”³⁷ In the book that Agnes is currently writing, she examines what she believes to be Socrates’s greatest insight, “that people are intellectually lonely — they live under an illusion of self-sufficiency. Dialogue was the only way out of their natural state.”³⁸ I would assert something similar regarding our *dialogia-theoria*. It’s a form of autotheory in which the two of us think together, and, in this respect, it’s Socratic. The best think-

36 Michel Foucault, “Self Writing,” in *Ethics*, ed. Rabinow, 215.

37 Rachel Aviv, “Agnes Callard’s Marriage of the Minds,” *The New Yorker*, March 13, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/13/agnes-callard-profile-marriage-philosophy>.

38 Ibid.

ing — perhaps the only true thinking — occurs in dialogue with others.

I'm not dismayed by your lingering attachment to "soul service," for I have never ceased to think of *dialogia-theoria* as anything but an act of soul service. You ask me to refresh your memory regarding the origins of what you call my neologistic "brainchild." For that, I must give partial credit to the Italian philosopher Mario Perniola, who has observed that the concept of *theoria* carries great importance in Greek thought and who derives the word "theoria" from "a fusion of *thea* (seeing) and *hora* (care, solicitude, urgency)."³⁹ Perniola's etymology resonates nicely with Foucault's concept of soul service, don't you think? As for *dialogia*, it is a portmanteau of "dialogic" and the suffix "logia."

Yours as always,

B.

Dear B.,

I've never heard of Agnes Callard, but I think she got it right when she wrote, "It takes two people to have a thought." Certainly, my best thoughts have usually come in communion with others. Thus, her contention makes me think that the term "autotheory" is dubious at best. It may even be a misnomer. With its use of the prefix "auto-," the moniker seems to refer to the self. Yet, at its most robust, autotheory is never solely devoted to a singular subject. Certainly, our brand of autotheorizing, a meeting point of the *auto-* and the *allo-*, reaches into the self and toward the other not simply to theorize one's own or the other's stories but to engage with the other in a sustained act of reflexive and reciprocal theorizing and to represent that dialogic performance with all of its transformative and epiphanic potential.

Yours,

39 Mario Perniola, "Between Clothing and Nudity," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part Two*, ed. Michel Feher (Zone Books, 1989), 239.

E

Dear E,

Just such a “dialogic performance with all of its transformative and epiphanic potential” occurs in the classroom, don’t you think? In fact, shortly after I began writing in an autotheoretical mode, I began to do so for pedagogical reasons, and, thus, my autotheory has almost always engaged with others. To explain how the unconscious works, for example, I tell my students about a series of bungled actions in which I nearly set my parents’ kitchen on fire while making iced tea. As I tossed several teabags into boiling water, one of the strings fell into the flames beneath the pot, setting itself and its little cardboard tag on fire. After putting out the flames, I spilled sugar all over the counter and onto the floor. The burning of the teabag’s tag and the spilling of the sugar occurred not once but three times, and so I had to ask myself why these particular bungled actions were repeating themselves and what they might mean. The answer to these questions came when I was standing on a friend’s front porch. As I leaned against the porch railing, it suddenly broke, and I fell backward into the yard.

“What was the answer?” I ask my students. “And why did falling off the porch help me to discover it?”

Once they get the hang of it, my students enjoy free association like the kind I ask them to engage in. It’s a hermeneutical process that makes sense to them.

“Does the teabag represent home?” asks one student.

Before I can answer, another student answers for me, saying, “Yeah, and the string could be your mama’s apron strings!”

“But,” says a third student, “that would make Dr. McLaughlin the little cardboard tag.” Everyone laughs at this image, including me.

“How does the porch fit in?” asks the first student.

“What is a porch?” I ask in return.

“A covered shelter,” says another student. “And the railing is supposed to keep you from falling.”

“But it also makes the porch an enclosed space, doesn’t it?” asks yet another.

“So it’s kind of like parents,” says the first. “They protect you, but they can also limit you.”

From the questions they ask, you can see that they’re beginning to understand how not only free association but also extended metaphor works. And just as metaphor is about connection, our brand of autottheory as *dialogia-theoria* (or soul service) is about connection, or relation, as you put it in your first postscript.

Yours for more dialogue,

B.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press, 2017.
- Aviv, Rachel. "Agnes Callard's Marriage of the Minds." *The New Yorker*, March 13, 2023. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/13/agnes-callard-profile-marriage-philosophy>.
- Barthes, Roland. "From Work to Text." In *Image Music Text*, translated by Stephen Heath. Hill and Wang, 1977.
- . "Musica Practica." In *Image Music Text*, translated by Stephen Heath. Hill and Wang, 1977.
- . *The Neutral*. Translated by Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier. Columbia University Press, 2005.
- . *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by Richard Miller. Hill and Wang, 1975.
- Bernard-Henri Lévy & Jacques Chancel — Topic. "L'écriture fragmentée." *You Tube*, November 5, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZ2YZVu_GTI.
- Bowlby, Rachel. "Introduction: Never Done, Never to Return." In *Studies in Hysteria*, edited by Adam Phillips. Penguin, 2004.
- Brostoff, Alex. "An Autotheory of Intertextual Kinship: Ambivalent Bodies in the Work of Maggie Nelson and Paul B. Preciado." *Synthesis: An Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies* 14 (2021): 91–115. DOI: 10.12681/syn.32413.
- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Edited by Adam Phillips. Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Donne, John. *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*. Edited by A.J. Smith. Penguin, 1982.
- Foucault, Michel. "Friendship as a Way of Life." In *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow. The New Press, 1997.

- . “Self Writing.” In *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow. The New Press, 1997.
- . *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1: *An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. Vintage, 1990.
- . “The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will.” In *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow. The New Press, 1997.
- Freud, Sigmund, and Joseph Breuer. *Studies in Hysteria*. Translated by Nicola Luckhurst. Penguin, 2004.
- McLaughlin, Becky, and Bob Coleman, eds. *Everyday Theory: A Contemporary Reader*. Pearson Longman, 2005.
- Nelson, Maggie. *The Argonauts*. Graywolf Press, 2015.
- NYU Florence. “Jack Halberstam — Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Guide to Gender Variance.” *YouTube*, March 28, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=quvWUlus6ao>.
- Perniola, Mario. “Between Clothing and Nudity.” In *Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part Two*, edited by Michel Feher. Zone Books, 1989.
- Riviere, Joan. “Womanliness as a Masquerade.” In *Formations of Fantasy*, edited by Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan. Routledge, 1989.
- Sedgwick, Eve. *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press, 1990.
- Tabor, James. *Blind Descent: The Quest to Discover the Deepest Place on Earth*. Random House, 2011.
- Twitchell, James B. *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror*. Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Walsh, Joanna. *#theoryplushouseworktheory! If a Leaf Falls*. Press, 2019.
- Zwartjes, Arianne. “Under the Skin: An Exploration of Autotheory.” *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies*, 6, no. 1 (2019). <http://www.assayjournal.com/arianne-zwartjes8203-under-the-skin-an-exploration-of-autotheory-61.html>.

Monologue on the Crip Education of a Bodymind

Andrew David King

You're writing to yourself from the past, though you'll speak of it as your present—since to remember is, in your false etymology, to *re-member*, to supply a prosthesis to a body that lives and thinks in the present. The fourth surgery looms and, with it, the possibility, increasingly distant, of a cure. You're hoping that, if it's true that “[a]t the center of cure lies eradication and the many kinds of violence that accompany it,” as Eli Clare asserts, then there might at least be bliss in annihilation.¹

If not this time, when? Maybe never: The first surgery, for a benign arrhythmia, was, ironically, the easy one. In and out. *You're done*, said the electrophysiologist when he ducked through your curtain, *except for the femoral wound*. *I have another question*, you said. *I knew you would*, he said.

¹ Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Duke University Press, 2017), 26.



Fig. 4.1. Self-portrait as ghost: Shanghai hospital room, awaiting surgery, 2017.

To be cured: to *feel* one has been cured. Your heart will stay scarred even when you are dead. It is scarred for all eternity. The fact of the scar is as present and imperceptible a form of violence as the national defense budget. Even when your body is eventually burned, this fact will be unassailable.

You want to be the fact of your past, another version of yourself. You want the facticity, but not the past: You want the past to be the present. Now.

Your new doctor, the one who authorized this fourth surgery for you — or should the term be “gave,” since so many of your past treatments were framed as indulgences you were lucky to receive? — delivered the shortest spiel about complications that you’d heard. You were grateful. You were already the statistical anomaly. Death was everywhere. It could just as well happen on the crosswalk’s piano keys.



Fig. 4.2. Fragments of an index of drug interactions embedded in a sheet of handmade sycamore-leaf paper.

So you're going in, going under. You consider the possibility that the spool has no more thread to unravel. You try to imagine it, but the exercise fails. In your mind's eye, the thread snakes into next week, and then the week after, and then the week after that — assignments to grade, bills, applications, letters, groceries, deadlines. The thread is pulled from some obscure, bottomless fund. You recall how Freud said it was impossible for us to imagine our own deaths: "Whenever we attempt to do so we can per-



Fig. 4.3. “You don’t pretend to understand this kind of logic, one that rejects the principle of non-contradiction.”

ceive that we are in fact still present as spectators.”² The self-portraits you’ve made since the beginning of your illness turn out to be mirrors: The self in each photo examines you, as you examine it.

You pass over it, set it aside. Time to worry about other things. How to save a few bucks by strategically deploying a coupon. What drugs interact with what drugs. What she meant by that. Whether the curtains are stained with coffee spatter or the guts of a bug — which you notice when

² Sigmund Freud, “Our Attitude towards Death,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14: *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works (1914–1916)*, ed. and trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud (Hogarth Press, 1957), 289.

you reach out to touch them and, without thinking, pinch them like skin.

You've long been interested in letters as literary artifacts, but you're most drawn to them when your conditions "flare," as you sometimes say. That seems to you an apt, if imperfect, metaphor, with its connotations of setting signal fires, of laying magnesium stars on the highway after an accident to make a new path. But only for a short while: Fire, like pain, seems incapable of being tamed into signification.

Even as it escapes the rigidification of writing, however, it somehow manages to be both legible and meaningful. The letter, journal entry, and even logbook preserve, you think, traces of what Georg Lukács called "the essential fire of selfhood."³ Fire, wrote Gaston Bachelard, is that which can contradict itself; for this reason, it is "one of the principles of universal explanation."⁴ You don't pretend to understand this kind of logic, one that rejects the principle of noncontradiction. Maybe, you think, this network of connections explains why you've so often thought of your nerve pain — the pain that pushed you toward your opened attic window in Vienna — in terms of fire: the flame of inflammation burning, tingling, sparking.

At the tip of the radiofrequency ablation catheter, the one used in each of your four cardiac ablations, was a kind of fire. Only in writing this, now, do you understand that fire to be both a linguistic instrument and a language itself, and your myocardium to be a kind of text. Inserted into a cut in your thigh, pushed up your femoral artery and into the center of your chest, the catheter, you realize, was a stylus. Its palimpsest was the tapestry of cardiac fib-

3 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (MIT Press, 1971), 61.

4 Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. Alan C.M. Ross (Beacon Press, 1964), 7.

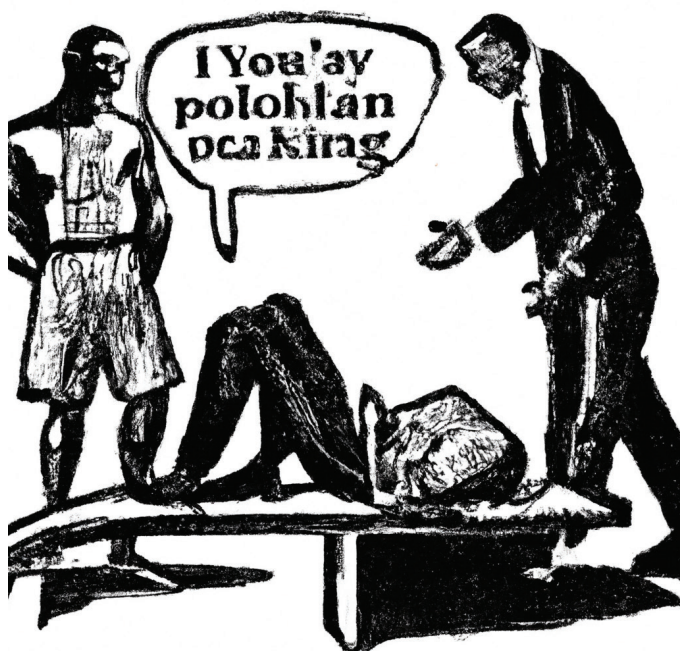


Fig. 4.4. DALL·E response to the prompt “A woodcut of a man attempting to persuade others that he is in pain, despite seeming healthy,” 2023.

ers that both generated electrical impulses and contracted in response to them: an autotelic text that reads and writes itself. Something — a virus, maybe — had already made an inscription there, a cipher the muscle couldn’t decrypt. For this reason, it sometimes beats out of time: too fast, too slow, a skipping record, a stammering telegraph.

Applied to one medical context, textual metaphors proliferate into others. They become, in their way, viral. You think of the phenomenon of reading medical texts on your own, googling from the cave of your darkened room, becoming what biomedicine pathologizes as the

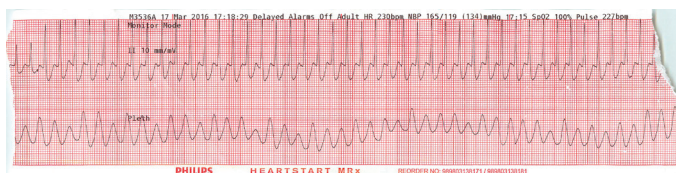


Fig. 4.5. “...how you prepared for that appointment by obsessing over the tea leaves of your own records and a dossier of medical articles ...”

“e-patient.”⁵ The way you’ve often put it — but never, in fact, to a doctor — was that these texts weren’t “written in Greek,” an inversion of the old saw all the more ironic for your having actually studied ancient Greek. The point was to insist that you and your physicians were reading, and speaking, the same language. In retrospect, it was a generous assumption. Between the person in the white coat and you on the exam table — your skin separated from the vinyl by a sheet of hygienic paper, to which your body is a marring ink — are miles of open ocean.

Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, imagines an artificial language — consisting of four words, all commands — shared by a pair of speakers as they attempt to construct a stone edifice.⁶ This, you think, is the situation between you and your doctors. Only very little succeeds in being built: You ask for a slab, and they hand you a clod of dirt. So you revert to accumulation: medical articles, Reddit posts, Excel spreadsheets, Google forms you devised to track your symptoms. All of these, whether you’ve written them or not, are journal entries, letters to yourself, miniature testimonies. They say, “This happened.” What matters is that you merely possess this data, for memory here is a kind of weapon. In a culture that asks you to forget that you are ill, that you are disabled,

5 Tom Ferguson and Gilles Frydman, “The First Generation of E-Patients,” *British Medical Journal* 328 (2004): 1148–49.

6 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 6e.



Fig. 4.6. "...just as, when you leave the exam room, the sheet on which your body has written will be torn from the scroll and new paper will take its place."

that you have needs that are not understood or countenanced, it is one of the only weapons you have. It allows you to speak into the silence that expects your silence in return, rippling its slick surface.

But it is a weapon that sometimes does not fire. It is a weapon that, when you open the drawer in which you keep it, sometimes disappears. You close the drawer, open it again. There it is.

This happened. Don't you remember being back in California, briefly, to meet with an electrophysiologist to ask for another ablation attempt — how you prepared for that appointment by obsessing over the tea leaves of your own records and a dossier of medical articles, how you were so anxious you could barely get through a sentence?



Fig. 4.7. Still life with cardiac medication, 2016.

Don't you remember your firelike terror at encountering the images of the lesions left in myocardial tissue by the radiofrequency stylus? You pored over those images of cadavers' hearts with their geode-esque layers, scarred with healing.

But that wasn't a test you could study for. It wasn't even a test you could read. Nor was it a test that would end, at least not yet — just as, when you leave the exam room, the sheet on which your body has written will be torn from the scroll and new paper will take its place.

You stop taking your cardiac medications five days before the surgery. Earlier than instructed, just in case. In this instance, you want your heart to speak wrongly — that is, arrhythmically. You trust that your surgeons, who have only partially understood you, will understand it better.

You land in California, where you'll have the procedure. A. picks you up at the airport. On the car ride to his place, he tells you about teaching Aristotle to his students.



Fig. 4.8. “A. lets you make portraits of him while you walk around Ocean Beach earlier in the day.”

You remember discussing with him how to pronounce the Greek word *organon*, the term used to refer to the corpus of the philosopher’s writings on logic. Instrument, though you also heard *organ*. That was one way people settled a debate about how Aristotle understood the nature of logic — with a name. Logic as tool, as scalpel.

Even walking the two blocks from A.’s apartment to the Korean restaurant sends your heart into a tantrum. A thumb punches your chest from the inside. You stop walking and start again fast enough for him not to notice in the dark.

You’ve taken your father’s old camera with you, the one you’d lugged overseas. A. lets you make portraits of him while you walk around Ocean Beach earlier in the day. You end up at the shack that houses the camera obscura, a leftover from long-gone Playland, bulldozed for row houses. Later, you sit with A., Y., and Y.’s brother on the lunar dunes, brushed by the tall grasses that tuft here and there, the only vegetation in sight besides long seaweed tails.

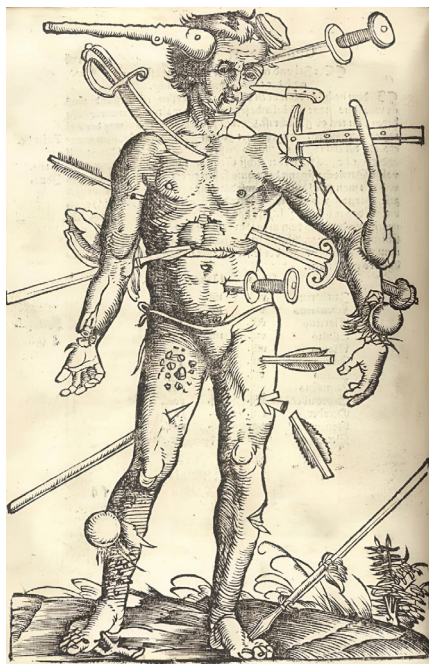


Fig. 4.9. Hans Wechtlin's woodcut of the "wounded man" prototype for Hans von Gersdorff's *Feldtbuch der Wundartzney* [Fieldbook of Surgery] (1517).

Now you're there — the beach — alone. You'd told A. you loved him, just in case, and drove to the last street parallel to the beach, all the while warding off martyrly self-pity. You try to make some long exposures of the moon. But you'd really come for the refrain of the highway's stoplight, too bright for the dark edge of the water and for the municipal lights gathered along the coast like clumps of hot coals. Wind-blown sand laps at the highway, covering up the crosswalks in places. Every ten minutes a car goes by and leaves tracks in it. Before the next one comes, these tracks are gone.

Aristotle thought of the heart, not the brain, as the center of cognition and emotion.⁷ Hippocrates, in one treatise, hints that he understood that the heart itself could become sick, that it could have diseases of its own.⁸ Could the heart, in its infirmity, communicate a clandestine knowledge, like the brain with its psychosomatic manifestations of stress? When you encounter or deploy locutions about what the body “speaks” or “knows,” you have your doubts. But there are moments when it does speak; there are things it knows. And it spoke then to you in the tall grass on the dunes, alone, without your glasses and with a lens that could barely gather enough light to focus. It spoke in violent gestures that made your breathing shallow and that you couldn’t understand.

But you listened. As one listens, through a wall, to an argument about one’s future.

At what point did you begin to adopt — or accept — disability as an identity?

At some point, you took up what Talcott Parsons called “the sick role,” the circuits of your daily life rerouting, by drastic recalculations and imperceptible shifts, away from able-bodied, “normate” life.⁹ But you’re not sure when exactly this happened. You call yourself disabled, neurodivergent, and chronically ill (How many times have you liturgically repeated this triad, this talisman of thirteen syllables, in university committee meetings?), but you

7 Aristotle, *On Youth and Old Age, Life and Death, and Respiration* 1–6, ed. and trans. Giouli Korobili (Springer Nature, 2022). See Giouli Korobili, “Aristotle and the Establishment of the Cardiocentric Theory,” in *ibid.*, 127–50.

8 Hippocrates, “Prognostic,” in *Hippocrates Volume II*, trans. W.H.S. Jones (William Heinemann, Ltd., 1931), 1–55, and Arnold M. Katz and Phyllis B. Katz, “Diseases of the Heart in the Works of Hippocrates,” *British Heart Journal* 24, no. 3 (1962): 257–64.

9 Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (The Free Press, 1951), and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1997).

can't recall when you placed yourself under the signs of these categories. To go under a sign, you think, is not all that distinct from going under the knife. The surgical connotations of the latter phrase collide with the Saussurean overtones of the former, hinting at the long tradition of taking violence and the act of naming to be related. In the definite article of "under *the* knife," you hear, too, the tantalizing suggestion that all violence, despite the plurality of its manifestations, shares an essence: on the street, in the surgical theater, on the news, hovering above your plate, even inside your heart.

It may not be true that there was a moment in time at which you "became" disabled (or ill, or neurodivergent), or even when you decided to label yourself as such. Henri Bergson says that all perceivers have direct experiences of what he calls "pure duration," indivisible time.¹⁰ If what Bergson spoke of as "pure duration" is that which doesn't admit of sequence, then illness is pure duration. It feels strange to write this; you feel your body protesting. There's nothing apparently stable, after all, about prolonged illness, its disordering of the ordinary. Writing about the phenomenology of illness in the poetics of Hillary Gravendyk, you used the term "diachronic illness," but "anachronic" or "achronic" may have been more accurate; illness sunders the linearity and cyclicity on which able-bodied conceptions of time and the logics of industrial capitalism depend. You're tempted to think of the time before illness, before disability, as entirely abstract. That time, it seems, belongs to a different person. The moment of rupture between him and you isn't a notch on a timeline but a difference in identity.

¹⁰ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Henry Holt and Co., 1911), and Henri Bergson, "The Idea of Duration," in *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey, trans. Melissa McMahon (Continuum, 2002), 49–77.

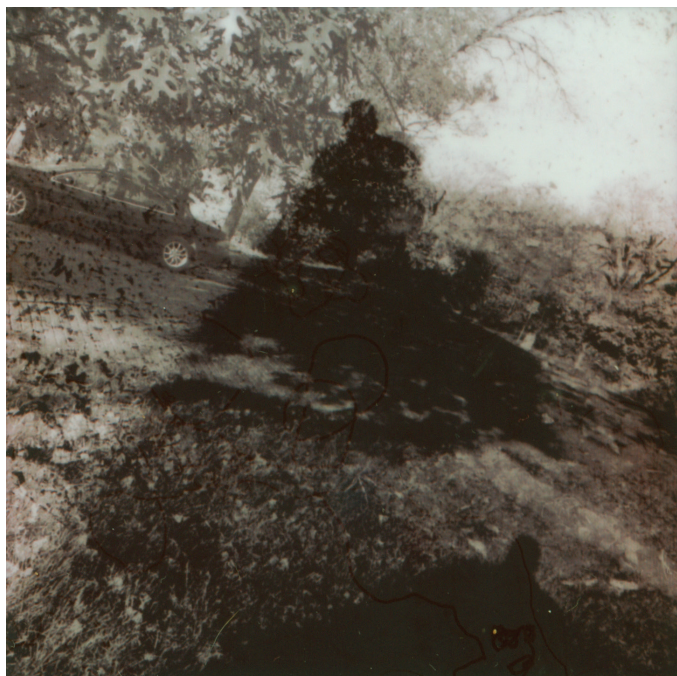


Fig. 4.10. “What you’re left with is a contradiction between your body, extended in space and time, and a time that cannot accommodate it but that it must necessarily inhabit.”

But maybe this is all wrong. Maybe the time of illness isn’t the stochastic expansiveness of Heraclitan flux, but a reverse Big Bang, the contraction of all time—which you’re spatializing in just the manner that Bergson would criticize—into a single, extensionless point. What you’re left with is a contradiction between your body, extended in space and time, and a time that can’t accommodate it but that it must necessarily inhabit. Here certain experiences of disability and illness may, phenomenologically speaking, converge. Unable to compress yourself into the extensionless pure ego of Descartes’s *cogito, ergo sum*, just

as unable to coax time from the shell into which it has vanished, you live as a failed equation.¹¹

As right as that revision seems to you — and as skeptical as you are that illness's disorders can liberate — you want to consider another possibility. Bergson appeals to pure duration in part because it avoids Zeno's paradox, the Eleatic philosopher's contention that motion is impossible.¹² One of Zeno's arguments comes down to us roughly as follows. To traverse a distance, one must first reach the halfway point; to reach the halfway point, one must reach a quarter of the distance; to reach a quarter of the distance, one must first reach an eighth of the distance. And so on ad infinitum. But it isn't possible to complete an infinite series of tasks in a finite time.¹³ Motion, therefore, is impossible. Diogenes is said to have refuted this argument by getting up and walking away when he heard it.¹⁴ But suppose we take it seriously, and suppose we accept Bergson's solution. Pure duration, then, is what makes action possible. And if, as you're suggesting, the experience of prolonged illness is an experience of pure duration, then illness is, counterintuitively, a site of action, of motion, of praxis.

How did you end up here? This argument runs against the grain of all you know of the temporalities of illness and pain. These, you think, are fundamentally disabling, even as they disclose new perspectives. From the single, compressed point of this time an unsequenced panoply of impressions unfolds: "Suffering that lasts is made up of a

11 "From the nuts we shell time and we teach it to walk: / then time returns to the shell." Paul Celan, "Corona," in *Paul Celan: Poems*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Persea Books, 1980), 48–49.

12 Bergson, "The Idea of Duration," 55–56.

13 Aristotle, "Book VI," in *Aristotle's "Physics,"* trans. W.D. Ross (Clarendon, 1936), 402–19. Aristotle reconstructs and refutes Zeno's argument in this book of the *Physics*.

14 Nick Huggett, "Zeno's Paradoxes," in *Everywhere and Everywhen: Adventures in Physics and Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 18.



Fig. 4.11. “A narrative, an argument; a failure of narrative, a failure of argument.”

thousand distinct sufferings, each one of which in its own right donates its own unique and changing character to thought,” Georges Poulet notes.¹⁵ You quoted this in your essay on surviving the pandemic, but it’s only now, you think, that you understand it.¹⁶ The hundreds of instant photographs you made while living in China and in Iowa, trying to make sense of your newfound afterlife, of the death you did not die, present themselves as the physical residuum of the explosion of the time of your previous life. You rearrange them on tables, scanner beds, your bed. A narrative, an argument; a failure of narrative, a failure of argument. Superficially divisible, they may be indivisible in substance.

15 Georges Poulet, *Studies in Human Time*, trans. Elliott Coleman (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 243.

16 Andrew David King, “from ‘Meditations in an Emergency,’” in *The Long COVID Reader*, ed. Mary Ladd, Andrew David King, and Regan McMahon (Long Hauler Publishing, 2023), 1–6.

You want to make a distinction here between ill time — with its pure duration entirely outside of the able-bodied sphere of capitalism — and crip time. “Crip time,” the more inclusive term, denotes all the ways that disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent forms of life inhabit or even constitute their own forms of time, against but also within ableist and saneist social orders.¹⁷ Ill time, as you imagine it, denotes not alternative orders but disorder, anachronism, a sequence that constitutes its own temporality only by shattering time — freezing here, rushing there, admitting of neither prediction nor constraint. The concept of crip time is useful as a theoretical and practical intervention in part because one can translate the needs it describes into terms legible to the able-bodied world. But can one do this with “ill time”? Can the resources of theory and argument do this without calling upon autobiography or testimony? And if not, what happens to argument? What happens to theory, to philosophy, if the empirical specificity of experience refuses to be expunged from it?

You want to term this the paradox of phenomenology in writings about disability, illness, neurodivergence, and crip life. Phenomenology offers a way to account for experience that relies on a tradition, often taken to begin with Husserl, that casts one of its key methodological moves as a “bracketing” of our ordinary assumptions about the world to arrive at the underlying structure of experience.¹⁸ Seen one way, this move seems to circumvent precisely that which makes disabled experience unique. But the heart of the issue, you think, is this: What counts as essential to an experience — a condition of its possibility — and what counts as contingent, unessential, disposable? Is not

17 For discussions of crip time and related notions, see Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013), and Ellen Samuels, “Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2017).

18 Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, trans. William P. Alston and George Nakhnikian (Martinus Nijhoff, 1964).

the spirit of disability critique animated by its denial of the legitimacy of this question's terms?

You're more optimistic than your earned cynicism suggests. In his autotheoretical "political phenomenology" of impairment, Jonathan Sterne uses a phrase — a command — you used in a poem a decade ago, one in which you tried to write about memory, to mark the beginning of the phenomenological endeavor: "Begin again."¹⁹ This, it seems to you, is a useful imperative for a phenomenological optimist. It promises, by a kind of force — an optimism of the will — an amulet against original sins.²⁰ If part of the practice of phenomenology as manifested in contemporary autotheory is a commitment to the labor of careful description and detail, then, you think, you can find a way to deal with the universalizing tendencies embedded in the phenomenological tradition. You take this position already knowing that the task of description is constitutively related to universalization in some way. To describe is to offer both a genus and a species, a type and a token. In describing your experience to others, no matter how granularly, you construct an abstract type that others can, in principle, inhabit.

But you might not be able to describe your experience after all. The lexicon of theory promises to achieve description while, in practice, deferring and demoting it; it teases the possibility of discursive mastery while shying away from the full responsibility of naming by insisting that what must be named is always just beyond the limits of one's existing vocabulary. This is all the more so, you're convinced, for disability, illness, and pain. Pain, you think, is no more "'effortlessly' grasped" by the subject than its

19 Jonathan Sterne, *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment* (Duke University Press, 2021), 18–20.

20 Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg (Columbia University Press, 1992), 172.

seriousness “utterly nullif[ies] the claims of the world.”²¹ The problem of pain brings with it problems of erasure, obliteration, and forgetfulness—but primarily problems of description. Virginia Woolf noted that the “merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare, Donne, Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry.”²²

You know, however, that the project of stocking criticism’s conceptual and lexical storehouse with what it’s currently missing isn’t a matter of simple journalism. The possibility of error—corrupted data, Descartes’s distorted stick in the glass of water—looms. Canguilhem asserted that there are bad readings of hemoglobin molecules just as there are bad readings of manuscripts.²³ But this awareness only goes so far, only provides a mild prophylactic. Is a player piano that reads a damaged scroll by playing a discordant note an example of error or of accuracy? Is the recollection of a distorted memory as it appears to you a kind of truth? What does the telegram of your arrhythmia say?

You are speaking to yourself via what you consider a form of theory—or, in any case, thought that leads into theorizing. A monologue, an autobiography, in a minor key of theory.

Sterne points out—echoing Barthes, who refers to the “grain” of a voice—how closely one’s voice is associated with one’s identity.²⁴ You recall watching Kym McDaniel’s

21 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 4, 33.

22 Virginia Woolf, “On Being Ill,” *The Criterion*, January 1926, 34.

23 Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett and Robert S. Cohen (Zone Books, 1991), 278.

24 Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Hill and Wang, 1977), 179–89, and Sterne, *Diminished Faculties*.

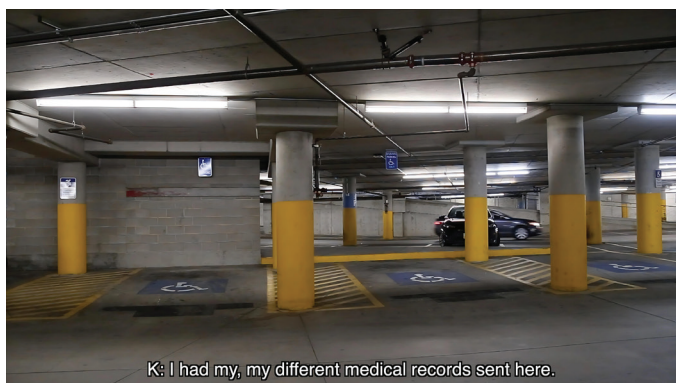


Fig. 4.12. Still from Kym McDaniel's *Invisible World* (video, 4:39, 2023). Reproduced by kind permission of the artist.

short film *Invisible World* (2023), in part narrated, if it makes sense to say so, by a recording of McDaniel's encounter with a doctor who denies her a disabled parking placard because she doesn't appear sufficiently disabled during the appointment. "You walked in here," the physician says, dismissing McDaniel's request in the chipper tone of institutional quietism.²⁵ For McDaniel, being read, wrongly, as an able-bodied subject entails a deprivation of civil rights. Shots of Utah desert ranges capped with snow, of parking lots and garages, serve as backdrops; neither McDaniel nor the physician appear in the film. McDaniel's voice is tired, muted, her protestations muffled by what you recognize as the dual pains of illness and dismissal. McDaniel is one of many Virgils available to descend with you into the bureaucratic hell of the sick.

This experience is one you understand. But how to say so? And in what voice? How does one write oneself into the world as disabled when one's body, one's pain, yields no signs — or, what's more, no signs the able-bodied and medical worlds are willing to read? How does one trans-

25 Kym McDaniel, dir., *Invisible World* (2023).

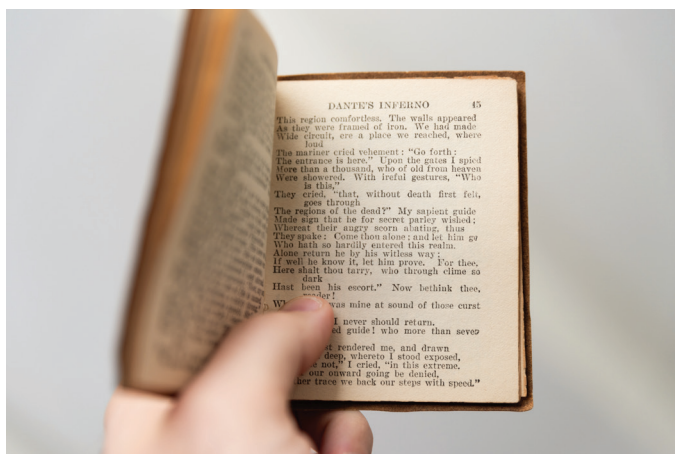


Fig. 4.13. “Who is this,” they cried, “that, without death first felt, goes through the regions of the dead?”

late the language of nerves, already barely intelligible despite its volume, into something others can understand? How can you make another feel what you feel? And why think that such empathy was ever the work of theory? Isn’t autotheory’s “break” within theory itself, its turn toward the body and the (however ghostly) self, “an episode easily disavowed as a moment of weakness, an intellectual lapse” — a “momentary discomposure” that has nothing to do with philosophy?²⁶

And why think that, even if your speech was heard, it’d be understood? Wittgenstein again: “If a lion could talk, we wouldn’t be able to understand it.”²⁷ The point, you take it, isn’t trivial. A lion capable of speech wouldn’t share what Wittgenstein elsewhere calls our form of life; to imagine a language, he says, is to imagine a form of life.²⁸ In

26 Robin Mackay, “Introduction: Laruelle Undivided,” in François Laruelle, *From Decision to Heresy: Experiments in Non-Standard Thought*, ed. Robin Mackay (Sequence Press, 2012), 1.

27 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 235e.

28 Ibid., 11e.

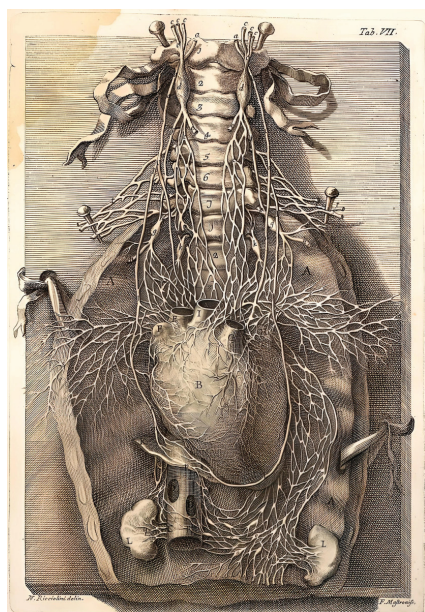


Fig. 4.14. Illustration of the nerves around the heart, from G.M. Lancisi's *De motu cordis et aneurysmatibus* [On the Motion of the Heart and on Aneurysms] (1728).

the clinic, among academic colleagues, you fear you're the lion — your speech lost to an intellectual discourse that privileges the coherent, well-behaved, and efficient, even while fetishizing the heterodox, provocative, and iconoclastic. You fear that your pain, and what you make of it, is medical and intellectual waste.²⁹ That it's excluded from the range of acceptable "affective modes and responses" of academia — even, or especially, under the rubric of "crip authorship."³⁰

29 Alison Kafer, "Manifesting Manifestos," in *Crip Authorship: Disability as Method*, ed. Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez (NYU Press, 2023), 183.

30 *Ibid.*, 190.

Revisiting the *Investigations* for the hundredth time, you notice something you hadn't noticed before, or which you'd forgotten. The very first words of the book are Latin from Augustine's *Confessions*, where Augustine describes his memory of acquiring language as a child: "And once I got my tongue around these signs," he writes, "I used them to express my wishes."³¹ None of your teachers, no philosopher you knew, had ever remarked on the significance of beginning a philosophical treatise with an excerpt from the text understood to have inaugurated an important form of autobiography.³² Others, picking up on comments Wittgenstein makes elsewhere, find in his work the basis for an "*autophilosophy*."³³ For your part, you can't help but encounter some of his problems and phrases — how to interpose language between pain and its expression, the idea that the philosopher approaches a question like an illness — as necessarily, rather than contingently, tied to a particular body and its experiences.³⁴

Begin again, understanding that the beginning, as Edward Said noted, is the space where "fiction and certain reality come together as identity."³⁵

You've become infected with theory, just as Abelard might've warned, echoing Juvenal, against becoming infected with writing — with the desire to write.³⁶

31 Augustine, quoted in Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 5.

32 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton University Press, 1971), 307.

33 David Kishik, *Self-Study: Notes on the Schizoid Condition* (101 Berlin Press, 2023), 2.

34 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 95e, 98e.

35 Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention & Method* (Columbia University Press, 1975), 78.

36 The Abelard quotation is possibly apocryphal or misattributed, although it appears in numerous scholarly publications, including David Henige, "'The Disease of Writing': Ganda and Nyoro Kinglists in a Newly Literate World," in *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History*,



Fig. 4.15. Self-portrait in bank window with disposable camera, 2013.

Recall a scene. Late spring on the central Florida coast. A decade ago. You've followed your father to a conference, telling yourself you have plenty of work to do, too, shifting between desk and sand. Of all the books you bring in your luggage, you stick with *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, assigned for a seminar on the critic's work. You wear a mask to each class meeting. It's 2013, and you're not sure what's happening with your body, but it's not good, and you're terrified. (*When a student comes to me wearing a mask*, a college advisor tells you, *I know something serious is going on*.) You don't understand the word "autotheory" yet, because you haven't heard it before, and you barely understand what "theory" means. The professor, D.A. Miller, is a generous and generative reader of Barthes. His feisty irony, his Dionysian seriousness, energizes you.

You feel bad that your symptoms have made you late or absent so often. You remember how, heading home one day, another student in the elevator looked at your mask

ed. Joseph C. Miller (Wm Dawson & Sons Ltd., 1980), 240–61, and Juvenal, *Satires*, trans. Jerome Mazzaro (University of Michigan Press, 1965), 90–91.

and said, gently, “Somebody doesn’t want to get sick!” Before the seminar’s final meeting, you took a disposable camera along on your commute to school, unsure, in the throes of panic disorder, if you were seeing everything before you for the last time. One photo shows you in the black window of a bank. Another captures the class around the seminar table as you back out of the room. But this last photo lives only in memory; you had, without knowing it, reached the end of the roll.

Remember, this is before your diagnosis. This is before the pandemic. In either case, is there an after? Can there be?

You couldn’t know, then, how important Barthes’s *Mourning Diary* would be — what it would inaugurate for you, sitting in the backyard with your hand on your chest, clutching at your heart and your breath, staring at the spring sun as it exploded through the buckeye’s cross-hatched branches. In Florida, the wind blowing grit into your face, you read Barthes’s theory of the fragment as it manifested through his grief. In another text, he insists that to write in fragments is to arrange stones around a perimeter, at the center of which is — what?³⁷ A heart, as trapped in a ribcage? Hegel described his completed system of philosophy as a circle of circles.³⁸ Is such a circle, with a lacuna blooming at its center, a unity? Should we think of illness narratives — like this one, even — as helping “concentric circles” of readers “understand what it means to be some body [*sic*]”?³⁹

Maybe, you think, you should answer the question of the old Christian hymn, “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?”

37 Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Bathes*, trans. Richard Howard (University of California Press, 1994), 92–93.

38 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. T.F. Garaets, W.A. Suchting, and H.S. Harris (Hackett, 1991), 39.

39 G. Thomas Couser, *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 292–95.

with blasphemy, with a breaking of the circle. You recall a passage from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* in which Barthes tells of doing just this. He had been keeping one of his ribs in a drawer — one removed during a surgery related to the tuberculosis that necessitated his living in a sanatorium for a time. Realizing, one day, that the function of any drawer is purgatorial — to help objects transition from a state of possession to one of expulsion — he seizes the rib and, rewriting Genesis, flings it into the Rue Servandoni, “scattering [his] own ashes” for “some dog to come and sniff them out.”⁴⁰ Not even the gods of antiquity were above the rending and dissolution — sometimes partial, sometimes total — of their forms. Zeus gives birth to Dionysus out of his thigh; Pelops’s shoulder, eaten by Persephone, is replaced with a shoulder of ivory.⁴¹ But the gods have their inscrutable, divine time; those without gods are left with narrative time, a time for which they must determine the end.⁴² Tuberculosis, Barthes writes, had “no other signs than its own interminable time”; it threw those it claimed into an invisible world.⁴³ Barthes’s throwing-out of the rib marked his refutation of that ossifying order.

With his gesture, Barthes left, if not an empty drawer, then a space in the drawer where the rib used to be. By handing the rib back to him, his surgeons affirmed that he was, in fact, the owner of his body.⁴⁴ But his rejection of the bone is just as much an assertion of ownership as a demonstration of the permeability, the malleability, of the body’s borders.

40 Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, 61.

41 Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths: The Complete and Definitive Edition* (Penguin, 2017), 56, 387.

42 Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction, with a New Epilogue* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

43 Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, 35.

44 *Ibid.*, 61.



Fig. 4.16. My Winter Garden photograph.

Memory, that weapon, is notoriously unreliable. Barthes, in his autobiography, not only writes in the vein of what contemporary discourse calls “autotheory” but also investigates one of its reservoirs, what he calls the “image-repertoire,” or the stock of theoretical, sensory, and imaginative resources each of us receives in childhood. The image-repertoire is a kind of code, written in brands or scars, and we spend our lives after childhood attempting to understand it. (Recall the radiofrequency catheter, its writing inside your chest.) But the existence of a code doesn’t entail its being read, let alone its readability. Barthes, it seems, understood that to connect the contents of the image-repertoire to reality required a painful purposiveness. After his mother’s death, Barthes, devastated, encountered a picture of her as a young girl in the garden of the house where she was born. This is the so-called Winter Garden photograph. In his attempt to recover her, to rediscover her, he finds all other photos of her to be merely analogical, mere abstractions at some remove from what they purported to depict. But the Winter Gar-

Nothing in That Drawer

Nothing in that drawer.
 Nothing in that drawer.
 Nothing in that drawer.
 Nothing in that drawer.
 Nothing in that drawer.
 Nothing in that drawer.
 Nothing in that drawer.
 Nothing in that drawer.
 Nothing in that drawer.
 Nothing in that drawer.
 Nothing in that drawer.
 Nothing in that drawer.
 Nothing in that drawer.

Fig. 4.17. Ron Padgett, “Nothing in That Drawer,” from *Great Balls of Fire* (1965). Reprinted by kind permission of Coffee House Press.

den photograph proves essential. It collects, he says, “all the possible predicates from which my mother’s being was constituted.”⁴⁵

You remember talking to D. about whether one should look at the Winter Garden photograph, which isn’t reproduced in *Camera Lucida* — Barthes’s book on photography, where it’s discussed — or in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. You remember what she said, that looking at it would be a kind of sacrilege. Still, you found it. You looked. The photograph had a flatness, a commonality; it didn’t speak to you in any kind of voice. You suspect this is true for others of your own Winter Garden photograph — the one that, for you, captures the perfect coincidence of sign and reality.

But this is the trouble. Is there any point in divulging, in bringing forth, that which remains unintelligible to

45 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1981), 70.

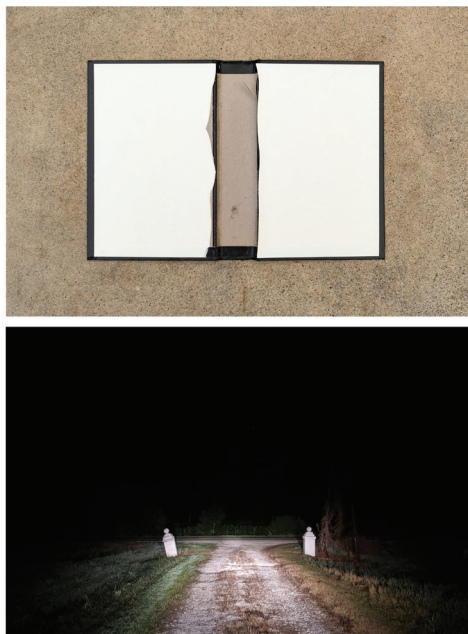


Fig. 4.18. Pandemic diptych: book prepared for scanning (John Milton's *Complete Poems and Major Prose*), with body of spider that used to live in its spine; gate to N's farmhouse, West Branch, Iowa.

others? Are the two horns of the dilemma really these: Either the evidence of your life must remain illegible or else become common property? Muteness, or dispossession?

Barthes's drawer reminds you of another, the one that appears in Ron Padgett's sonnet "Nothing in That Drawer," which consists of the repetition of the title fourteen times.⁴⁶ Fourteen searches, fourteen confessions.

You remember, too, the masterful reading your student, N., gave of it, how his voice took everyone in the

⁴⁶ Ron Padgett, "Nothing in That Drawer," in *Great Balls of Fire* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 3.

classroom through the rooms of the house, searching for the lost object — the rib, maybe, that would complete the body — and not finding it. Is there resignation, you wonder, now as then, in the last line — or is it acceptance, celebration? Can closure look exactly like the failure, or the rejection, of closure?⁴⁷

You recall the last time you saw N. in person. In the days before you left the Midwest for good, having spent the previous two months fighting for the tests for yet another diagnosis and the necessary medicines, you head out to West Branch for dinner at N.'s rented farmhouse. You pull off the highway and drive through a pair of white pillars that remind you of crooked, blunt fangs.

You eat and talk for hours. Deer tiptoe by the fence; the sun sinks behind the western trees; the sky darkens. COVID is still raging; you both put on masks whenever you step indoors. Outside, in N.'s old lawn chairs, you take them off for a while. Put them back on. Take them off again. N. gives you a parting gift: a kaleidoscope he made in a workshop, a copper tube with shards of glass entombed in one end. It makes the sound of ice quietly breaking when you hold it to your face and turn it.

You don't remember how you both arrive at the part of the conversation that you're about to recall, but at some point, N. tells you what happened to his former partner, P. Apparently P. had said, in the minutes leading up to his death (the details of which you redact), "You want me gone? I'm gone."

You trade him a story of your own — one that doesn't, for the time being, end in death, though someday it will. It's 2016, you say, and you're driving to an appointment with a private cardiologist — the ones covered by your family's insurance have refused to help you — at which you'll learn the results of a cardiac MRI. You're in so much

47 Lyn Hejinian, "The Rejection of Closure," in *The Language of Inquiry* (University of California Press, 2000), 40–58.



Fig. 4.19. Illegible mark (“tv”?) written on neck in advance of stellate ganglion block procedure, 2023.

pain that, if the prognosis is bad, you’ve decided to end your life. You have a plan already laid out for this. You tell him how, just before the appointment, you choose to bring with you a copy of D.T. Suzuki’s *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, which you read in the waiting room while a reality tv show clamors on and kids play games on their parents’ phones. You tell him how you no longer believed that bad things couldn’t happen to you. How you sat at the last intersection before the clinic’s parking lot in your oversized sweatpants and track jacket, hands on the wheel, waiting for the light to change and hoping it wouldn’t. How you needed a shave. How you thought you could be going to the lake to walk the dog right then; you could be meeting J.; you could be living another life, which wouldn’t be your own.

You told him you'd fantasized, then, that you were already in the future. Maybe you'd already gotten the news; maybe you'd rehearsed the worst case so many times, awake and asleep, that living it seemed like the memory and not the source of the memory.

But the news, it turned out, was good. You decided you would live. You got a sandwich. You went to the lake, lay on the grass, and read a translation of Aesop.

Here's the thing, you tell N. You and your cardiologist's criterion for a bad prognosis was a certain sign on the MRI. If that's what the scan showed, you would've ended things. But in the year before your conversation with N., a study was published that suggested that this sign didn't, by itself, suggest a fatal prognosis — only this sign in a certain portion of the heart did. Imagine, then, if things had been otherwise, if the scan *had* indeed shown the sign in that location. You might have ended your life on what you thought was the best evidence. (You want me gone? I'm gone.) But the best evidence, hardly a few years later, would have changed. Other signs would appear in your future.

You stand in silence, in communion, on the darkness of the lawn. Behind N., past the majestic fir that marked the northern boundary of the property, you see a faint, milky splatter in the night sky, but only when you don't look at it directly. It's the comet Neowise, the kaleidoscope of its icy fragments seemingly fixed in place, though you know they're crashing through space at inhuman speeds.

You look directly at it; it recedes. You look at N. It glows over him in the corner of your eye — now a broken halo, the circle of its gold spilling.

Maybe the dream of frustrated embodiment is to become text — to become pure information, knowledge apart from media, memory unhindered by failing technologies of flesh.



Fig. 4.20. Billboard, San Francisco, CA, 2023.

Maybe one of the reasons why it takes you so long to read physical books once you acquire them is because, as objects, they seem complete. An entanglement with a sweating, pained, crip body can only taint them. Closed ecosystems, your imperfections will infect them. You think this was the case with your copy of Friedrich Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, which you bought on a frozen day in Iowa City, along with a copy of Lessing's *Laocoön*, and then put on a shelf to live with for years before reading it.

For Schiller, the aesthetic is the essential condition of human freedom — an idea Hegel would later subsume into his account of Spirit's unfolding. Neither an instrument nor a way station on the road to utopia, the aesthetic is the condition through which human beings reconcile sense and reason and become capable of rational freedom at all. Isn't there something deeply right about this — something that links it to Kant's claim, as intuitive as it is opaque, that

beauty is the symbol of the morally good?⁴⁸ You're attracted to this linkage, more clearly articulated by Schiller than by Kant, between how the world is and one version of how it ought to be. The point of philosophy — said Marx, tormented his whole life by a skin disease — is to change the world, not simply describe it.⁴⁹ Aesthetic existence, Schiller insists, will overcome humanity's fragmentation, reconciling opposites in the "totality of human nature."⁵⁰ The aesthetic, here, is a means, even as it also characterizes, in parts of the letters, the final state at which humanity aspires to arrive. "The work of art is understood as the consummation of the symbolic representation of life, and towards this consummation every experience already tends," writes Gadamer in *Truth and Method*.⁵¹

Applying what you've tried to distill here to the question of disability and autotheory, you rewrite Gadamer: "The work of theory is understood as the consummation of the symbolic representation of embodied thought, and toward this consummation every embodied thought already tends." Embodied thought is done by "bodyminds" — a term that pervades disability critique.⁵² Despite, or perhaps because of, its awkwardness, it captures both the ontological fusion and the conceptual par-

48 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 225–28.

49 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx–Engels Collected Works*, vol. 5: *Marx and Engels: 1845–1847*, trans. Clemens Dutt, W. Lough, and C.P. Magill (International Publishers Co., 1976), 5, and Sam Shuster, "The Nature and Consequence of Karl Marx's Skin Disease," *British Journal of Dermatology* 158, no. 1 (2007): 1–3.

50 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, trans. Reginald Snell (Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1954), 103.

51 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 64.

52 Sami Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (Duke University Press, 2018), and Margaret Price, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268–84.

tioning of material bodies and immaterial minds. When you reread this proposition, this Frankensteined bit of Gadamer, you find that you agree with it, but that your training — which swells up in you, a near-physical sensation — recoils. Thought, it wants you to say, is that which exists apart from the imperfections, illusions, and pains of bodies; bodies may excrete or accrete it, but it is fundamentally something *other* than what they are.

Sara Ahmed claims that theory can do more “the closer it gets to the skin.”⁵³ Ahmed’s work reminds you that autotheory’s recent popularity in Northern Hemisphere critical discourse must remain cognizant of its genealogy. A descendant of forms of academic and nonacademic writing practiced by feminists, writers of color, and queer and trans theorists, autotheory opposes what Barthes described as a criticism grounded in verisimilitude, which privileges the self-evident, the disciplined, the legible, and the common.⁵⁴ The theory of autotheory, its own nascent subgenre, consists of a constellation of stimulating provocations. Autotheory sits uneasily with views of theory as an elite or exclusively academic activity not only in virtue of the kinds of experiences it investigates — and to whom they belong — but in virtue of its willingness to incorporate empathy into its intellectual projects.⁵⁵

How does disability fit into this account? “There is no theory of autotheory that does not start with the ill and

53 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press, 2017), 10.

54 Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, trans. Katrine Pilcher Keuneman (Continuum, 2007), 4; Shannon Brennan, “Troublesome Knowledge: Autotheory in the Queer Classroom,” *ASAP/Journal* 6, no. 3 (2021): 707–30; and Daniel Shank Cruz, *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times: Theapoetics, Autotheory, and Mennonite Literature* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024).

55 Dillon Chapman, Elizabeth Rooklidge, and Justin Duyao, “Notes: A Conversation on Autotheory,” *HereIn*, February 2, 2022, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20231129055316/https://www.hereinjournal.org/projects/notes-a-conversation-on-autotheory>, and Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (MIT Press, 2021).

disabled bodymind,” no “theory of autotheory that is not already crip,” writes Ellen Samuels.⁵⁶ Of course — and as Samuels knows — the theory of autotheory, insofar as it exists, often seems unaware of this. Her insistence is therefore a corrective. The claim is less surprising, even if no less important, when understood in relation to historicist impulses in the history of criticism. “Why do you study the shell unless to form some idea of the animal?” asks Hippolyte Taine, analogizing texts to exoskeletons.⁵⁷ In *The Story of My Life*, Helen Keller likens the development of nautilus shells to the cultivation of the human mind. “Just as the wonder-working mantle of the Nautilus changes the material it absorbs from the water and makes it a part of itself, so the bits of knowledge one gathers undergo a similar change and become pearls of thought,” she writes.⁵⁸ Embodiment grounds both analogies — one that explains the historical and intellectual record in terms of material existence, and another that recasts intellection in somatic terms.

An emphasis on the material conditions of lived experience not at the expense of the abstract but as its supplement: This, you think, characterizes the epistemic vistas onto which autotheory opens. Disability and illness, you’ve proposed, are sites where the body writes, is written, and is at times literally written on. Autotheory offers another form for disability theory, one where experiences illegible to mainstream culture can be made legible — not without some cost, perhaps, but still. And disability theory, in turn, offers autotheory the chance to confront the tension at its heart between the singularity of one’s embodied position and the discursivity of language. Where

56 Ellen Samuels, “Twenty-Seven Ways of Looking at Crip Autotheory,” in *Crip Authorship: Disability as Method*, ed. Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez (NYU Press, 2023), 203.

57 Hippolyte Adolphe Taine, *History of English Literature*, vol. 1, trans. Van Laun, rev. ed. (The Colonial Press, 1900).

58 Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (Doubleday & Company, 1954), 45.

disability and autotheory meet, this tension becomes, like Schiller's notion of the aesthetic, a bridge. Theory's devotion to the conceptual and autobiography's attention the particular collide, producing not reconciliation but synthesis.

Indeed, autotheoretical impulses must sit at, or near, the heart of disability critique, for these impulses make available the data from which so many of the field's arguments set forth. This data includes its own gaps, produced in part by what Miranda Fricker calls "hermeneutic injustice," the inability to represent one's experience to oneself or others because the necessary conceptual resources have been withheld.⁵⁹ But not all the absences that disability critique tracks need emerge from such structural deprivation; sometimes the body itself, as you've noted, thwarts its own representation. "[E]very time I give an account of experience," Sterne writes, "I also give an account of how it is not fully available to me."⁶⁰

Even the structure of this monologue, beginning not with a thesis but with experience — an incomplete record of what, cribbing from Schiller, you might call your "crip education" — amounts, you think, to an argument in the theory of autotheory. It exemplifies a procedure by which one not only draws theory out of experience and forces theory into conversation with experience, but operates on the assumption that theory and experience are not — as Kant understood — separate.⁶¹ It transmutes into practice the twinned insights that experience is already theory-laden and theory indebted to experience. A strange result of this, you think, is that scholarship and theory can begin to read like letters, addressed not to the abstract mind of the social body but to particular, rooted bodies. (Your

59 Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

60 Sterne, *Diminished Faculties*, 39.

61 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 193–94.



Fig. 4.21. Aftermath of an earthquake along the Hayward Fault, Hayward, CA (home of the author), 1868.

monologue is a dialogue with readers who cannot talk back — at least not here, on the page.)

Is it necessarily illusory to imagine oneself hailed by a text, one distant in terminology or time? What seems most flooring about the experience that attends this heretical thought — one embodied life cutting through the sediments of time to reach another — is also that which seems least amenable to defense in familiar intellectual terms. This autotheoretical experience, fusing captivation and alienation, might be described as an encounter with the “stutter of history,” a phrase that Douglas Fogle uses to describe the work of German artist Thomas Demand, an artist famous for his meticulous paper reconstructions of ordinary and historical scenes, which he then photographs.⁶² The “banal” images with which much of Demand’s work is concerned bring history, memory, and “active forgetfulness” together: “It is on the porous frontier

62 Douglas Fogle, “The Stutter of History,” in Thomas Demand, *The Stutter of History* (MACK, 2022), 10–23.

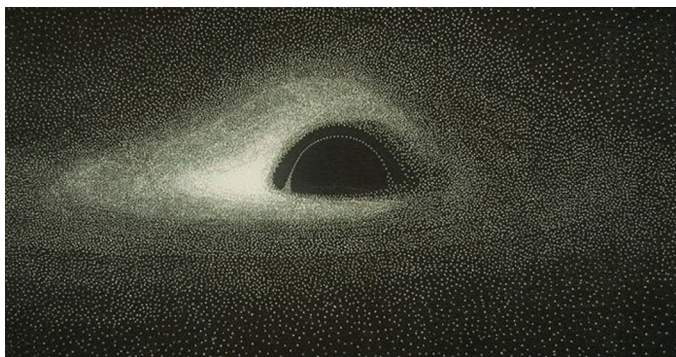


Fig. 4.22. The first data-compiled image of a black hole, hand-plotted by Jean-Pierre Luminet, 1979.

between these two categories of images” — the iconic and the banal — “where history begins to stutter and storytelling begins.”⁶³ But history can stutter like a recording or like a human speaker; stuttering can denote local friction or an entire form of disabled life. The phrase’s capaciousness, you think, is to its advantage. It suggests an analogy between the writer of history and the seismograph. Disability is written from constantly shifting ground; those who, for purposes of survival, must constantly attend to their precarity or marginality as bodyminds may be positioned to perceive when their houses — and their countries, and their bodies of thought — are not quite level.

The late disability theorist Tobin Siebers described aesthetics as the study of how certain bodies make other bodies feel.⁶⁴ You want to add a corollary: Aesthetics is the study of how the imperceptible or incommunicable — as the sign of all that is illegible or not-yet-legible — becomes communicable, of how what has been erased or destroyed lingers in the present. You think of Hegel’s account of the development of what he took to be at once thought and

63 Ibid., 12.

64 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (University of Michigan Press, 2010), 11.

reality, of how what appears to dialectically annihilate its opposite instead sublates (*aufheben*) it, incorporates its past into its present. Parts of your heart have been burned into silence, and yet they remain with you; they go where you go. Maybe what's written in the fibers of that muscle is the text — an unreadable one — that you've been trying to read, and will be trying to read, forever. Though you doubt you'll decipher it, you'll live, meanwhile, in the pull of its gravity, reaching through oblivion to better discern its outline.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press, 2017.
- Aristotle. "Book VI." In *Aristotle's "Physics,"* translated by W.D. Ross. Clarendon, 1936.
- . *On Youth and Old Age, Life and Death, and Respiration* 1–6. Edited and translated by Giouli Korobili. Springer Nature, 2022.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*. Translated by Alan C.M. Ross. Beacon Press, 1964.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. Hill and Wang, 1981.
- . *Criticism and Truth*. Translated by Katrine Pilcher Keuneman. Continuum, 2007.
- . *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Translated by Richard Howard. University of California Press, 1994.
- Bergson, Henri. *Creative Evolution*. Translated by Arthur Mitchell. Henry Holt and Co., 1911.
- . "The Grain of the Voice." In *Image Music Text*, translated by Stephen Heath. Hill and Wang, 1977.
- . "The Idea of Duration." In *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, edited by Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey, translated by Melissa McMahon. Continuum, 2002.
- Brennan, Shannon. "Troublesome Knowledge: Autotheory in the Queer Classroom." *ASAP/Journal* 6, no. 3 (2021): 707–30. DOI: 10.1353/asa.2021.0037.
- Canguilhem, Georges. *The Normal and the Pathological*. Translated by Carolyn R. Fawcett and Robert S. Cohen. Zone Books, 1991.
- Celan, Paul. *Paul Celan: Poems*. Translated by Michael Hamburger. Persea Books, 1980.
- Chapman, Dillon, Elizabeth Rooklidge, and Justin Duyao. "Notes: A Conversation on Autotheory." *HereIn*, February 2, 2022. Archived at <https://web.archive.org/>

- web/20231129055316/https://www.hereinjournal.org/projects/notes-a-conversation-on-autotheory.
- Clare, Eli. *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*. Duke University Press, 2017.
- Couser, G. Thomas. *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.
- Cruz, Daniel Shank. *Ethics for Apocalyptic Times: Theapoetics, Autotheory, and Mennonite Literature*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024.
- Ferguson, Tom, and Gilles Frydman. "The First Generation of E-Patients." *British Medical Journal* 328 (2004): 1148–49. DOI: 10.1136/bmj.328.7449.1148.
- Fogle, Douglas. "The Stutter of History." In Thomas Demand, *The Stutter of History*. MACK, 2022.
- Fournier, Lauren. *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. MIT Press, 2021.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Our Attitude towards Death." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 14: *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works (1914–1916)*, edited and translated by James Strachey with Anna Freud. Hogarth Press, 1957.
- Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton University Press, 1971.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. 2nd rev. ed. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Prison Notebooks*. Vol. 1. Edited and translated by Joseph A. Buttigieg. Columbia University Press, 1992.
- Graves, Robert. *The Greek Myths: The Complete and Definitive Edition*. Penguin, 2017.

- Hegel, G.W.F. *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*. Translated by T.F. Garaets, W.A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris. Hackett, 1991.
- Hejinian, Lyn. "The Rejection of Closure." In *The Language of Inquiry*. University of California Press, 2000.
- Henige, David. "The Disease of Writing': Ganda and Nyoro Kinglists in a Newly Literate World." In *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History*, edited by Joseph C. Miller. Wm Dawson & Sons Ltd., 1980.
- Hippocrates. "Prognostic." In *Hippocrates Volume II*, translated by W.H.S. Jones. William Heinemann, 1931.
- Huggett, Nick. "Zeno's Paradoxes." In *Everywhere and Everywhen: Adventures in Physics and Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Husserl, Edmund. *The Idea of Phenomenology*. Translated by William P. Alston and George Nakhnikian. Martinus Nijhoff, 1964.
- Juvenal. *Satires*. Translated by Jerome Mazzaro. University of Michigan Press, 1965.
- Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana University Press, 2013.
- . "Manifesting Manifestos." In *Crip Authorship: Disability as Method*, edited by Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez. NYU Press, 2023.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Edited and translated by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- . *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Edited by Paul Guyer. Translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Katz, Arnold M., and Phyllis B. Katz. "Diseases of the Heart in the Works of Hippocrates." *British Heart Journal* 24, no. 3 (1962): 257–64. DOI: 10.1136/hrt.24.3.257.
- Keller, Helen. *The Story of My Life*. Doubleday & Company, 1954.

- Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction, with a New Epilogue*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- King, Andrew David. "from 'Meditations in an Emergency.'" In *The Long COVID Reader*, edited by Mary Ladd, Andrew David King, and Regan McMahon. Long Hauler Publishing, 2023.
- Kishik, David. *Self-Study: Notes on the Schizoid Condition*. ICI Berlin Press, 2023.
- Korobili, Giouli. "Aristotle and the Establishment of the Cardiocentric Theory." In Aristotle, *On Youth and Old Age, Life and Death, and Respiration 1–6*, edited and translated by Giouli Korobili. Springer Nature, 2022.
- Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel*. Translated by Anna Bostock. MIT Press, 1971.
- Mackay, Robin. "Introduction: Laruelle Undivided." In François Laruelle, *From Decision to Heresy: Experiments in Non-Standard Thought*, edited by Robin Mackay. Urbanomic/Sequence Press, 2012.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *Marx–Engels Collected Works*. Vol. 5: *Marx and Engels: 1845–1847*. Translated by Clemens Dutt, W. Lough, and C.P. Magill. International Publishers Co., 1976.
- McDaniel, Kym, dir. *Invisible World*. 2023.
- Padgett, Ron. *Great Balls of Fire*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965.
- Parsons, Talcott. *The Social System*. The Free Press, 1951.
- Poulet, Georges. *Studies in Human Time*. Translated by Elliott Coleman. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956.
- Price, Margaret. "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain." *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268–84. DOI: 10.1111/hypa.12127.
- Said, Edward. *Beginnings: Intention & Method*. Columbia University Press, 1975.
- Samuels, Ellen. "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2017). DOI: 10.18061/dsq.v37i3.5824.

- . “Twenty-Seven Ways of Looking at Crip Autotheory.” In *Crip Authorship: Disability as Method*, edited by Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez. NYU Press, 2023.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Schalk, Sami. *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction*. Duke University Press, 2018.
- Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*. Translated by Reginald Snell. Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1954.
- Shuster, Sam. “The Nature and Consequence of Karl Marx’s Skin Disease.” *British Journal of Dermatology* 158, no. 1 (2007): 1–3. DOI: 10.1111/j.1365-2133.2007.08282.x.
- Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Aesthetics*. University of Michigan Press, 2010.
- Sterne, Jonathan. *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment*. Duke University Press, 2021.
- Taine, Hippolyte Adolphe. *History of English Literature*. Vol. 1. Translated by Van Laun. Rev. ed. The Colonial Press, 1900.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Edited by P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte. Rev. 4th ed. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- Woolf, Virginia. “On Being Ill.” *The Criterion*, January 1926.

A Note on the Impossible Novel: For Roland Barthes

Jeremy Stewart

At the opening of *The Preparation of the Novel*, Roland Barthes dreams of a new writing that promises a new life: a single practice that would merge his lecture course at the Collège de France with the writing project he desires, not merely a novel but a Novel, the desire for which breaks forth “at the moment when [he] realizes that death is real.”¹ Barthes’s Novel is bound to the fantasy of “a life entirely dedicated to writing,” one contrasted with “*ronron*,” boredom as the sound of traffic.² This possible life and writing both become sadly, even tragically, impossible because of an auto accident. Only days after the conclusion of his lecture course, on February 25, 1980, Barthes was hit by a laundry van, and he died in the hospital on March 26, 1980, from the injuries he sustained in that accident.

1 Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, ed. Nathalie Léger, trans. Kate Briggs (Columbia University Press, 2011), 5.

2 Antoine Compagnon, “Roland Barthes’s Novel,” trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October* 112 (2005): 23.

The Preparation of the Novel is the book reconstructed by Nathalie Léger and translated by Kate Briggs from Barthes's notes from his last lecture course, "La Préparation du roman." The course concludes without the completion of a novel or Novel; just eight pages of notes are all that remain of Barthes's "Vita Nova" (new life).

Three days before the accident, on February 22, Barthes was interviewed by Laurent Dispot. When asked about the subtitle of *Camera Lucida* (i.e., *A Note on Photography*), Barthes remarked, "It was with sincere modesty that I called it a 'note' in the subtitle, because it's [...] just barely a thesis, a proposition."³ The writing before you, too, must remain only a modest note. You see, I am driving right now. Yes, I am sure you do not believe me, but it is true — as I write this note, I am driving to work. How is that possible, you ask? I am voice-typing, from speech to writing, if you will.⁴ And though I am driving to work, it is also a sentimental journey;⁵ to write is, Barthes writes, "to say whom [I] love"⁶ — that is, Roland Barthes. This note is for Barthes, arguing on his side (of the road), in favor of Barthes; in the name of my love for Barthes, I follow this route, write (speak) this note, and mourn the loss of the man and his writing.

Again, like Barthes's note on photography, the note you now read is so titled in part for the sake of its not-quite-incidental

3 Roland Barthes, "From Taste to Ecstasy," trans. Linda Coverdale, in *The Grain of the Voice* (University of California Press, 1991), 352.

4 In Barthes's brief "From Speech to Writing" (1974), trans. Linda Coverdale in *The Grain of the Voice*, he begins a discussion of transcription by evoking the future death of the one who speaks: "We really must last a bit longer than our voices" if our words are to reach "the book, eternity" (3). In *The Preparation of the Novel*, he avers that "for a writer, the issue isn't how to be 'eternal' [...] but how to be desirable after death" (303). For my part, I am transcribing my speech into a Google document using the Google Gboard app's voice-typing function on a Samsung Android phone, hands-free.

5 Perhaps it is not too eccentric to note that Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* was published on February 27, 1768, and Sterne died on the following March 18. It, too, is a text narrated through an alter ego ("Yorick") who is all but indistinguishable from the author.

6 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 14.

flirtation with a lack of direction: It comes to nothing; the point is not the point (of arrival). To take up a favorite Barthesian theme, it drifts.⁷ Perhaps I know where I am going (indeed, to work), but I also know that I am not going anywhere with my argument, not least because the time of my commute will be much shorter than the time it would take to arrive any place much farther from where I started. If I navigate this circular route safely, notwithstanding heavy traffic, I will have, for a time, faithfully steered the *auto* or *autos*.⁸ Now, this might be a good time to mention that I have, personally, been in auto accidents that have resulted in the writing-off of no fewer than sixteen vehicles (only one was my fault, and thank God no one was hurt), including the car in which I voice-typed this text. But never mind. For now, all I ask is that you sit back, buckle up, and enjoy the ride.

Notable Impossibilities

In the context of *The Preparation of the Novel*, the notion of a note has another meaning; for Barthes, a Novel is composed of notes. The novelist's art is first to "write the Present *by noting it*"⁹

7 Andrew Brown, *Roland Barthes: The Figures of Writing* (Clarendon Press, 1992), writes that Barthes's notion of "drift" is "more persuasive as a way of registering a feeling that we do not live in a time of radical innovation, either conceptual, political, or discursive: to drift may be a late option, a *fin-de-siècle* way of trying to 'keep writing' (in both senses of the phrase) in the face of a scepticism [*sic*] about the possibility (or the value) of writing anything really new" (7). My own drifting will take me away from the topic or topos, but also back and forth from speech to writing.

8 In the interview "An Almost Obsessive Relation to Writing Instruments," translated by Linda Coverdale in *The Grain of the Voice*, Barthes tells us that "personally," he "proceed[s] according to a method I would call [...] 'controlled accident'" (182). Voice-typing is a writing instrument that chimes with a principle of controlled accident in that it captures thought on the fly in the form of speech, is error-prone, and lacks punctuation. One hopes that using it while driving will favor the exercise of control rather than the happenstance of accident.

9 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 17 (emphasis in original).

and next to navigate the “passage”¹⁰ of these notes, which capture the incidents of daily life (perhaps as a photographer does, operating the “*pen-camera*”¹¹), from “a fragmented Notation of the present” to “a plan for a Novel.”¹² Although it was not at all a Novel I planned to write, the passage from voice-typing to the writing before you was like one from “the discontinuous to the flowing, [...] the smooth.”¹³ I do not mean to praise its smoothness. I mean to emphasize the attitude of alliance to Barthes and his dreamt-of method that motivated my adaptation to voice-typing. And there is another affinity I wanted to strengthen between *The Preparation of the Novel* and the form of my response to it: Barthes’s lecture course begins with “a fantasy”;¹⁴ namely, “the discovery of a new writing practice.”¹⁵

I, too, have desired a new writing practice. After starting a new job that required a return commute of between two and three hours, my fantasy was that voice-typing might allow me to continue writing despite the loss of my daily writing time. In other words, in creating this text, I tested the hypothesis that voice-typing could allow me to write what I might like to call a commuted sentence. “Method = the methodical exploitation of a hypothesis [...] of *production*,”¹⁶ writes Barthes, and, indeed, my method was to test-drive my hypothesis. I did not yet know that the way of working I had envisioned would turn out to be impossible. So, even though I have faithfully attempted to improvise this text while driving, using voice-typing, if I have proven anything, it is only that I could not overcome the extraordinary difficulty of writing while driving. I continue to survive the journey (so far), but my method has, to date, yielded

10 Ibid., 18.

11 Ibid., 91 (emphasis in original).

12 Ibid., 90.

13 Ibid., 18.

14 Ibid., 3.

15 Ibid., 5.

16 Ibid., 20.

only texts that are almost illegible.¹⁷ I have found it impossible to say what I am thinking.¹⁸

If you found it just as difficult to suspend your disbelief when I claimed to have voice-typed this text, your doubt was justified. Indeed, the problem goes beyond the reader's projection of the necessity of smoothing out the discontinuities; it will be impossible for you to be entirely sure which parts of this text were voice-typed from the driver's seat of my black 2008 Honda Fit¹⁹ and which were typed at my desk. Thus, your confidence in my project is threatened by a certain drifting uncertainty in voice, method, and genre.

Why, then, must I include myself in the writing? What of the academic convention of achieving a formal, objective tone through an impersonal mode? I will return to this topic, but for now, I cite Barthes, who at the opening of *The Preparation of the Novel* insists that "the subject is not to be repressed — whatever the risks of subjectivity."²⁰

Subjectivity notwithstanding, can the voice-typing conceit, which I have made a figure for a new life in writing, survive the foregoing confessions? *Mais oui*, the life I live commuting is never totally remote from death, either as a possibility that is inherent to the activity — that is, my possible death or someone else's — or as a way of measuring the hours of my life, emptied

17 Again, in the interview "An Almost Obsessive Relation to Writing Instruments," Barthes says that "once you learn to type well enough, writing directly at the typewriter creates a kind of unique spontaneity which has its own beauty" (179), perhaps a spontaneity analogous to the process of voice-typing, which I would suggest has its own unique spontaneity, but I hesitate to ascribe any such beauty to the work I have voice-typed.

18 Barthes speaks disdainfully of "a 'Bic style,' which is really just for churning out copy, writing that merely transcribes thought" ("An Almost Obsessive Relation to Writing Instruments," 178). To transcribe thought might be imagined to be an achievement, but this aside from Barthes suggests he might have held the greater achievement to be a style out of reach of any immediacy.

19 On February 14, 2024, this car, in which I voice-typed a significant portion of this writing, was totaled in a rear-ending that took place in Vancouver as I was driving home from work. I was not voice-typing at the time.

20 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 3.

by commuting, against the inevitability of death. And, indeed, death by auto accident is more than a possibility; it is a routine occurrence on my route.²¹

This note would appear to be impossible. And yet, Barthes writes of the “*Novel through fragments*,” a writing practice “that seems impossible at first may turn out to be possible after all.”²²

A Subject in Contradiction

Like many readers of Barthes, I find it pathetic or tragic that Barthes’s *Novel*, the aforementioned “*Vita Nova*,” was never completed, and, indeed, I could almost join those who, when Barthes’s death coincided with this failure to produce a novel, “didn’t fail to give meaning to this coincidence.”²³ Of course, Barthes himself writes that “all mythical narratives rehearse [...] the idea that death serves some purpose.”²⁴ His readers should perhaps hesitate to make Barthes’s death serve the purpose of giving too definite a meaning to his last lecture course. At the same time, “*Death*,” writes Nathalie Léger, “always confers the solemn resonance of an epigraph or an enigma on the last words to be pronounced.”²⁵ Barthes would have loved to have produced a *Novel*, and his failure to do so seems to be interpretable, somehow, within the same sad circle of meanings that describe the end of his life: the grief that suffused the period following his mother’s death and the sad circumstances surrounding his own death.

In addition to the impotence with which he concludes his course, there is also the problem that the kind of *Novel* Barthes desires belongs to another world, another age. Barthes spends

21 More than 200 people die in motor vehicle accidents in British Columbia every year. For more information, consult “Statistics,” *Insurance Corporation of British Columbia (ICBC)*, <https://www.icbc.com/about-icbc/newsroom/Pages/Statistics.aspx>.

22 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 18 (emphasis in original).

23 Compagnon, “Roland Barthes’s *Novel*,” 23.

24 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 9.

25 Nathalie Léger, “Editor’s Preface,” in Barthes, *Preparation of the Novel*, xvii.

considerable time in *The Preparation of the Novel* lamenting a past Novel, a past French language, with, Compagnon says, a “skepticism about the future of language and of literature” that is “undeniable.”²⁶ Compagnon reads this late Barthes as a reactionary: “Taking sides against Novelty [...], Barthes adopts one by one all the features of the antimodernist.”²⁷ Jonathan Culler agrees that in *The Preparation of the Novel*, Barthes shows evidence of a shift from a radical critical stance to a reactionary one.²⁸ With this late text of Barthes’s, Culler laments that, in contrast to his earlier writing, Barthes’s concern for language has “dropped out and [that] Barthes now seems to want to champion literature, *l’œuvre*, against *texte*.”²⁹ “I cannot avoid the conviction,” writes Culler, “that this loss vitiates his last thinking of literature.”³⁰ A vitiation unto death, perhaps.

There is indeed a sense that Barthes is at cross-purposes with himself when, in the lecture course, he declares that he is in search of “a new writing practice,”³¹ and that he hopes to find it in the old form of the Novel. However, there is something odd about his Novel. In Compagnon’s reading, Barthes regards the conventional novel as preserving certain forward-looking possibilities. However, “the death of literature,” which Barthes laments numerous times in the text, also appears, for Barthes, to mark “the end of the novel.”³² For Compagnon, this apparent contradiction is possible because Barthes’s use of “the nomenclature ‘novel’ was a ruse.”³³

We shall consider what kind of ruse Compagnon takes it for, but before we do, let us note that almost everyone who writes about *The Preparation of the Novel* observes two strange things

26 Compagnon, “Roland Barthes’s Novel,” 27.

27 Ibid., 29.

28 Jonathan Culler, “Preparing the Novel: Spiraling Back,” *Paragraph* 31, no. 1 (2008): 109–20.

29 Ibid., 119.

30 Ibid.

31 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 5.

32 Compagnon, “Roland Barthes’s Novel,” 30.

33 Ibid., 31.

about it. First, that a course ostensibly about the novel takes a huge amount of time on haiku, and, second, that the course also spends lavish attention on the trivial details of the daily lives and writing routines of a handful of writers. These two oddities become stranger still when one recalls that Barthes rarely wrote about poetry and that his theoretical stance had charted, up to this point, a direction away from popular conceptions of the novel as “work” toward the novel as “text,” which is to say away from the authors as an explanation for or cause of their texts, and toward the text as “a methodological field” that is “experienced only in an activity of production.”³⁴ For him to apparently reverse that position remains a scandal for some of his most faithful readers. Where Barthes writes that “this course is so fundamentally ‘archaic’ that in a sense its object — that is, the notion of the *Work* — no longer has any currency in the field of letters,”³⁵ Compagnon notes the irony of an “indictment he makes without recalling the role he himself played in the substitution of the Text for the Work.”³⁶

Is there something pathological about Barthes’s turn to the novel? “To the avant-gardes of the late ’70s, of course, this new love of the novel was crazy,” writes Adam Thirlwell.³⁷ Thirlwell claims that in *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes had shown how the novel “represented an outmoded politics, a kind of fascism.”³⁸ We cannot imagine a fascist Barthes, but perhaps we can imagine one who is sick or even losing his mind. Reading the manuscript for *The Preparation of the Novel* “troubled me,” writes Compagnon. “From its handwriting, above all the final additions, it was obvious that Barthes was not well.”³⁹ The Barthes who so desperately seeks new life appears to be afflicted by a

34 Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Hill and Wang, 1977), 157.

35 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 279.

36 Compagnon, “Roland Barthes’s Novel,” 28.

37 Adam Thirlwell, “My Novel, My Novel,” *The New Republic*, December 7, 2010, <https://newrepublic.com/article/79745/novel-roland-barthes-realism>.

38 Ibid.

39 Compagnon, “Roland Barthes’s Novel,” 25.

sickness unto death, as physically vitiated, to use Culler's word, as his thinking has apparently become.

The relative continuity of Barthes's political radicalism, his taste for literary avant-gardism, and his physical and mental health appear tightly bound together in these readings. Commenting on how Barthes seems to turn reactionary against the avant-garde and, indeed, against even the contemporary in literature, Compagnon names, as the two "recurrent and essential" themes of *The Preparation of the Novel*, "the death of literature, and its survival in the poem."⁴⁰ Compagnon draws these two themes into a continuity that makes them one, and that continuity is a matter of genre: "*The Preparation of the Novel* is not a 'preparation of the novel,' but a search for the poem as salvation of literature."⁴¹ Compagnon represents this move as a retreat into poetry. Quite aside from any question of genre, what the turn toward the Novel seems to represent in Barthes is, I might suggest, a retreat not into any literary form but into fantasy.

Driving Force

It is within his capital *F* "Fantasy" of a new practice "as an energy, as a motor that gets things going"⁴² that Barthes searches for the source of new life — and perhaps wisely, given that fantasy promises, simply, life itself, the desire upon which life depends. Kris Pint writes that fantasy is "the driving force behind every dream."⁴³ This is one of the reasons it is a Novel that Barthes dreams of writing rather than a poem, yet he spends much of the first half of the lecture course speaking on haiku. Barthes desires the Novel of his youth as written by the writers of his youth, even André Gide, who represents the "writer *as* fantasy" according to Barthes.⁴⁴ Of course, in *The Preparation of the Novel*, Bar-

⁴⁰ Ibid., 26.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 11.

⁴³ Kris Pint, "How to Become What One Is: Roland Barthes's Final Fantasy," *Paragraph* 31, no. 1 (2008): 39.

⁴⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, 41 (my emphasis).

thes cites not one of Gide's novels but his *Diary* as a text that "makes a *creative whole* out of Life + Work."⁴⁵ In the *Diary*, "the *I* is sincere," but "the *I*'s sincerity is artificial," and yet "sincerity is irrelevant" because "the author is not a *witness* [...] but an *actor of writing*."⁴⁶ It is the form of the *Diary* that allows the whole to be a creative rather than an organic one, as a result of the impossible synthesis of sincerity and artificiality. A witness might be called upon to testify to the strict truth of a text, but an actor of writing creates a vital text that teaches us how to read "the life."⁴⁷ So, to make a creative whole out of life and work is the fantasy Barthes calls upon Gide to represent, and grounding that wholeness in the relation between form or genre and in writing as an activity offers a clue as to the deeper nature of the fantasy.

Barthes could hope to save the novel from its fate by turning it into neither a diary nor poetry but into something else entirely: not a text in any genre but a personal fantasy of writing. He only *appears* to be talking about the novel, but he is actually talking about himself, his inner workings. The reaction Compagnon and Culler diagnose is an illusion produced by their desire to read a more consistent, static Barthes.

Culler remarks on how the reversal of stance in *The Preparation of the Novel* "vitiates" Barthes's project, inconsistent as it is with the most powerful expressions of his critical stance. But we have also been warned, by Barthes himself, of a figure who will at times contradict itself, as when he writes in *The Pleasure of the Text* of "the reader" as the "anti-hero" who "endures contradiction without shame."⁴⁸ Barthes immediately and implicitly allies himself with this reader in his admission that the binary of "*Pleasure/Bliss*" upon which the book's argument relies is "not the source of absolute classifications."⁴⁹ It may not matter at all that this is how the book opens, given that we have also been

45 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 209 (emphasis in original).

46 Ibid., 209 (emphasis in original).

47 Ibid.

48 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (Noonday Press, 1975), 3.

49 Ibid., 4 (emphasis in original).

warned that the structure of this text results from a chance operation, an abecedarian constraint. In any case, we might imagine that a reader could be attracted to the shimmering tension between the categories of pleasure and bliss because it is the demand for a perfectly consistent philosophical or critical stance that is vitiating.

Everything said at the beginning of *The Preparation of the Novel* valorizes the subject, but given the drift of Barthes's work more generally, what makes this gesture necessary? It is necessary because Barthes is once again announcing himself as the desiring subject, even though that desire draws him into a contradiction. Glossing Lacanian psychoanalysis, Pint remarks that "the subject is merely the effect of the fantasy,"⁵⁰ and not just any fantasy, but one that is not of the phenomenal subject's choosing. Contradiction inevitably emerges along with the subject as if by accident — and this may be construed as a positive virtue, as when Benjamin Widiss argues that the "increasing embrace of the idiosyncratic in the last decade of [Barthes's] life almost allowed him to overcome the programmatic claims for which he is most famous."⁵¹ The life of the author would surpass the death of the author. There is a contradictory consistency at work in this inconsistency; it is very much the same Barthes who writes of a man who "endures contradiction without shame"⁵² who also opens *The Preparation of the Novel* with the declaration, "Better the illusions of subjectivity than the impostures of objectivity."⁵³

Even so, I do not want to defend Barthes against Culler too vigorously, in part because, for me, Culler aptly locates the elements of *The Preparation of the Novel* that feel somehow disappointing. Pint argues that the central fantasy in all of Barthes's writing takes as its starting point the desire for the

50 Pint, "How to Become What One Is," 40.

51 Benjamin Widiss, *Obscure Invitations: The Persistence of the Author in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (Stanford University Press, 2011), 8–9.

52 Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 3.

53 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 3.

mother — that is, the desire to occupy “an idyllic play area”⁵⁴ with (alongside) the mother — and the fantasy culminates in “becoming a writer.”⁵⁵ This is the problem: Barthes’s mother is dead, and his former life is gone. More importantly, his fantasy of becoming a “writer” (which, of course, *he had already been for decades*, albeit in another genre) could not unite with its object in the Novel any more than it could restore the wholeness of the mother–child relation. In *The Preparation of the Novel*, Barthes’s fantasy of becoming a literary writer was the source of his new life, and the apparent quixotism of this quest reads as a contradiction, a pathetic lapse, a weakness, a remainder for us, but not necessarily for Barthes, at least not until the course’s painful conclusion, because as long as he can sustain the fantasy, it continues to drive him on, if only waywardly toward its fulfillment. Indeed, the contradiction is the reader’s, not the writer’s, and for the reader, Barthes’s fantasy is experienced not as a fantasy but as a fiction, even a novelistic one. The inconsistency we read into Barthes has a *plot*.

Returning for a moment to the notion of fantasy as a motive force, Pint introduces a faintly automotive image when he writes that “Barthes’s final fantasy [...] to create a *vita nuova*, [...] is bound to run into its own impossibility.”⁵⁶ The impossibility in question is the distance that structures the logic of desire; a distance must necessarily remain between Barthes and his Novel in order to keep him moving. However, within my own trajectory as a voice-typing commuter, it is impossible for me not to interpret Pint’s words as a commentary on the very impossibility in which I find myself.

Multi-Impossibility Pile-up

There are four senses, all ordinary, in which I read the impossible in, through, or after *The Preparation of the Novel*. The first

54 Pint, “How to Become What One Is,” 41.

55 Ibid., 44.

56 Ibid., 46.

is that which cannot occur—for example, the impossibility of Barthes completing his Novel *now*. The second is that which is insuperably difficult, something such as the possibility, as it was at the time, of Barthes completing his Novel *then*. Like a commuter, Barthes dreads “the Breakdown,” which consists in “the sudden realization that writing is difficult to the point of impossibility.”⁵⁷ The third usual sense of the impossible is that which is extremely undesirable. This impossible is so because we do not pursue it but attempt to avoid it—as when scholars such as Compagnon and Culler distance themselves from the late Barthes’s position. Finally, I want to recognize that impossibility which is, like an impossible child, *wayward*.⁵⁸

This last mode of the impossible figures as an openness to accident in that it lacks the determination of a real, definite, or possible goal. Barthes sees the accident coming, at least as a possibility. “It’s [...] possible,” writes Barthes, “that the Novel will [...] be exhausted and accomplished by [...] its Preparation.”⁵⁹ He immediately recognizes the bounds—that is, both the termination and the determination—inherent in that possibility. He knows what comes next: “Another title for this course [...] could be ‘The Impossible Novel.’”⁶⁰

We will return to imagining the *Preparation-as-Novel*, but for now, let us note that Barthes’s Novel has satisfied, by turns, each of the four definitions of the impossible listed above. Barthes’s Novel is not a novel but a fantasmatic non-novel; its perhaps aversive truth *is* its inconsistency. Part of the waywardness that leads Barthes away from the novel is his “refusal ‘to lie,’” a childish pledge with which we are dared to accept Barthes’s preposterous bluff. “*I don’t know how to lie*,” Barthes tells us; his

57 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 268.

58 Eric Daffron aligns “wayward thinking” with the thinking of the interstice in a statement that prefaces his Barthesian autotheory experiment in Daffron, “Interstitial Living: Fragments towards an Ethics,” *The European Journal of Life Writing* 11 (2022): 33.

59 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 20.

60 Ibid.

"imagination [...] doesn't tell tales."⁶¹ It is as though for Barthes, fiction is coterminous with lying, a notion that would, itself, make a passable fiction or lie.

Ordinarily, we might imagine that a novel would be a work of fiction. Barthes's fantasized Novel, however, is primarily concerned with capturing the "Moment of Truth" — a truth beyond truth in our ordinary sense, a truth he also calls "the *Intractable*," an impossible truth in that (other, fictional) sense.⁶² Barthes has imagined a form of life for a writer of such a truth; he has also imagined for it a literary form, that of his fantasmatic Novel, a vacated form that gives life by driving it forward, toward impossibility. When Barthes writes that "Method = path" — that is, "the path to be traveled and the end of the journey, the method and the accomplishment"⁶³ — it is of the same order of coherence. The mirrored fantasies that drive Barthes along this particular path — that of reunifying with the mother and that of becoming a writer — could also be said to be the ones that lead to his accident, not as a matter of necessity but of contingency and accident. Thus, with impossible prescience, Barthes can describe the structure of his Novel-course as that of "a little (domestic) Tragedy."⁶⁴ Both life and death exceed the bounds of the text, but Barthes can still say he is "remaining within the bounds of 'my truth.'"⁶⁵ Let us here cross the center line, borrowing Barthes's formula, in which he characterizes the haiku as the "art of the contingent," which is also to say, the "art of the *Encounter*."⁶⁶

An Other Genre

When can an encounter be said to have occurred? Is it a matter of some definite proximity or of contact? Perhaps an impossible question. And yet I want to ask: Are you encountering me,

61 Ibid., 197 (emphasis in original).

62 Ibid., 107.

63 Ibid., 20.

64 Ibid., 128.

65 Ibid., 197.

66 Ibid., 51 (emphasis in original).

here, now, in this text? Before you lies the book *Autotheory and Its Mothers*. Sorry, I meant *Others*. Of these others, one might imagine another person, perhaps the constitutive other of a Hegelian opposition (whether master or slave), or the phenomenological alter ego of Husserl (another self), or the other of the Levinasian encounter (the [m]other who is superior to, and prior to, oneself), or the other of the Lacanian symbolic order (an intersubjective other). Yes, we could be talking about any of these others, and, indeed, we could be talking about you, the reader, the first other any autotheory text could encounter. However, I also want to suggest another reading of the *Others* in this book's title; that is, the others beside/s autotheory; that is, the other forms or genres it would not be in order to speak of itself as one.

One genre from which autotheory distinguishes itself is theory as such. To this end, autotheory has been defined in terms of "the integration of the auto or 'self' with philosophy or theory, often in ways that are direct, performative, or self-aware."⁶⁷ This definition could also describe Barthes's oeuvre-spanning project, and that is no accident. Indeed, retrospection allows us to see in Barthes a precursor to autotheory, as Kris Pint and Maria Gil Ulldemolins do when they characterize Barthes's *Camera Lucida* as "a textbook example of a proto-autotheoretical text."⁶⁸ They write of Barthes's relationship to autotheory in terms of his influence on key recent writers of autotheory: Maggie Nelson, Christina Sharpe, and Kate Zambreno, among others.⁶⁹ "While it might be a stretch," Pint and Gil Ulldemolins write, "to de-

67 Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (MIT Press, 2022), 6.

68 Kris Pint and Maria Gil Ulldemolins, "Roland Barthes and the 'Affective Truths' of Autotheory," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 53, no. 4 (2020): 120.

69 To offer genealogies and lists of precursors and practitioners is a recurring gesture in writing on autotheory. See, for example, Robyn Wiegman, "Introduction: Autotheory Theory," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 76, no. 1 (2020): 1–14, in which she writes not only of authors but also of entire movements and cites a genealogy tracing autotheory back to Augustine.

clare a direct lineage between all autotheory and Barthes, his work irrefutably opens possibilities for this [...] form.”⁷⁰ But form is, indeed, a central obstacle to the path leading from *The Preparation of the Novel* to autotheory. The novel as such is one of autotheory’s *other* others because of its relationship to fiction. According to Pint and Gil Ulldemolins, “The adherence to truth is crucial to the genre of autotheory, precisely because it is an essential part of the ‘autotheoretical’ contract with the reader.”⁷¹ Remembering the scandalously discontinuous person (a “reader”⁷²) whom we encounter at the opening of *The Pleasure of the Text* — that is, the one who “mixes every language, even those said to be incompatible”⁷³ — what author could sign the contract proffered by such a genre? Pint and Gil Ulldemolins describe the situation as “a perfect stalemate: the genre requires some sincere truth-speaking, but sincerity has to borrow a ‘form,’ turn intimacy into a ‘pose’”; for them, it is “autotheory’s ‘moral resistance’ [that] prevents it from turning into fiction.”⁷⁴

Now, Barthes mirrors that moral resistance when he insists his inability to write a Novel is precisely because he “never make[s] anything up.”⁷⁵ The lecture course that is the *Preparation* is avowedly predicated on a fantasy and one that transforms the Novel into something other than itself. It might be this that allows us to imagine that *if* it is possible to read *The Preparation of the Novel* as a novel, that possibility might emerge from the *Preparation*’s own fantasmatical, even fictional formulation of the Novel. In other words, the work of fiction that Barthes creates is his odd and oddly personal notion of the Novel as a genre.

If it is the Novel itself that is, thus, Barthes’s fiction, it may also be his truth. When Barthes’s fictional Novel is also legible as a proto-autotheory, it is because its moments of truth tes-

70 Pint and Gil Ulldemolins, “Roland Barthes and the ‘Affective Truths’ of Autotheory,” 118.

71 Ibid., 125.

72 Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 3.

73 Ibid.

74 Pint and Gil Ulldemolins, “Roland Barthes and the ‘Affective Truths,’” 126.

75 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 108.

tify, obliquely, to the discontinuous subject that is Barthes the man. The obscurity of personal fantasy makes it necessary that the most truthful sincerity will always be one the author cannot have intended. The power of the unintentional truth, which inevitably overshadows any conscious disclosure, reconfigures autotheory's relationship to a confessional mode and, instead, compels autotheory to function as parapraxis, an unintended slip. Fiction can remain in Barthes's blind spot, as it might for autotheory, not only because the self is not so transparent to itself but also because a personal confession, no matter how truthful, never means only what one intends it to mean. No moral resistance could entirely eliminate fiction as a possibility in any narrative any more than it could eliminate figuration, equivocation, and the poetic dimension from language. When one speaks, one always risks a slip. Barthes, too, slips and fails to avoid fiction, inconsistency, and impossibility, instead falling into them — truthfully — by accident.

Driving Autonymy

So is Barthes writing autotheory? No, that claim would be anachronistic and, thus, impossible (or perhaps fictional). From one perspective, Barthes's relation to autotheory is an accident, given that he cannot literally have known that autotheory would follow him. From another, it is not an accident to the degree that Barthes's work itself produces the possibility of autotheory. Barthes spends considerable time in *The Preparation of the Novel* imagining possible solutions to problems of form, problems that keep reappearing in various ways: as a psychological problem (of decision) for the author; as a logistical problem (in the rhythm of authorial life that could produce the right form); as a historical problem (related to the relative adequacy of the conventions of the novel of a given era for representing the author's values). Form is also represented as a relation between parts internal to a work (see the "Book/Album, or, as in Proust's case,

Novel/Essay”⁷⁶). “The diary” presents itself, for a passing moment, as a potential solution to the “conflict between the World (Life) and the Work,” but it is found to be an “unsatisfactory” one.⁷⁷ Ultimately, when the desired “experiment [...] ushers in *life writing*, the life written,” it is also “inextricably [...] a thanatography,” a record of “the fragmentation, indeed the pulverization of the subject.”⁷⁸ This formulation threatens to bring to mind other, more literal kinds of pulverization.

What relation could hold between “thanatography” and autotheory? Another way to ask this question might be to ask what is at stake in the name given to autotheory as a genre, form, tendency, or movement. Barthes writes that “all contemporary literature is autonymic; it consists in [...] writing the impossibility of *writing*.”⁷⁹ The writing of the new, of the now, names itself, and it names itself after an impossibility. Now, of course, the ancient Greek *theōria* means viewing, contemplating, speculating. I am speculating right now, too. I interrupt myself to spend a little longer gazing at the ancient Greek *autos*, which refers, of course, to the self and to the *same*. *Autos* thus carries the universalizing logic that imagines an other who is both autonomous and essentially like myself. “With the term ‘autotheory’ [...] comes the risk of a potentially excessive methodological individualism that places primacy on the *autos* or self,” writes Fournier.⁸⁰ Autotheory thus brushes against the familiar accusation of narcissism in that it could be regarded as a practice of self-absorption or self-seeking. In the name of that accident, I will fantasize (if not theorize) another autotheory, inspired or misdirected by the stupid accident that gives the car the name of the “auto.”

When I drive, I alone drive; I drive alone. There is one driver in the car, as indeed there can only be. Yet, in traffic, I am surrounded by other drivers. I experience the phenomenon of traffic in terms of the proximity of these others, but not in terms of

76 Ibid., 192.

77 Ibid., 207.

78 Ibid., 210 (emphasis in original).

79 Ibid., 269 (emphasis in original).

80 Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, 272.

my own presence as a driver. The deception of the autos or *autos* is that the same is also true for other drivers; it is not themselves but other drivers who compose traffic for them. The attention of the driver of an auto is (or should be) consumed by their own self-as-driver, yet forced (by threat of violent death/s) to attend to present-but-unknown others. Above all, the real experience of driving, in stark contrast to that promised by automobile commercials, is far from exciting but is, in fact, *boring*. For the commuter, stimulation equals stress. Despite the close proximity of drivers to one another, they are not intimate. Even when drivers touch, as in a collision, they achieve no intimacy, and, thus never really *encounter* one another. In writing, too, perhaps intimacy is an illusion — and yet, one feels it could be the perfect place to encounter another “I.” Or, at least, that might be the fantasy that drives me to and through autotheory.

This is another way Barthes’s notion of the “conflict between the World (Life) and the Work”⁸¹ could be dramatized; though I experience writing as a source of motivation, the hours I spend commuting take me away from writing — and bring violent risks. The fantasy that voice-typing could keep my writing alive keeps *me* alive, even as the failure of the attempt pushes me to redeploy voice-typing, here, as a fiction, an impossible truth. Autotheory transforms this situation by allowing me to stage this text as a personal encounter, whether or not the intended truth aligns with the parapraxical truth, but the deeper risk that always hovers over the text is that of violence. Violence destroys intimacy. To universalize is to eliminate the personal — and the contradiction may not be avoidable.

Another fictional confession: Perhaps I am the theorist of the violence I practice. Were this the case, another autotheory would open, encircling itself, running over my body and everybody. I practice a virtual death every day, and not just my own. When I drive to work, I practice the death of Roland Barthes whether I will it or not, in that I could quite possibly kill someone the same way the laundry-van driver killed Roland Barthes.

81 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 207.

I do not know whom I might kill: someone beloved, someone brilliant, someone working on a great novel, someone no one cares about (the job of allotheory might be to imagine this person). My impossible, personal autoaccident is that I have to risk death for the sake of survival. Viewed another way, the commuter's situation is a universal absurdity—life today is fraught with a heightened degree of fatal risk to which we are all exposed, whether as driver, passenger, or pedestrian. The auto proposes itself as a universal mode of transport, with which one may identify oneself, but only for those who can afford to maintain it (or for those who, like myself, can afford neither to maintain the commuting life nor not to). In any event, what the auto affords is a non-isomorphic but nonetheless universal experience of violence. Framed by the automobile, the “I” who speaks on behalf of the auto speaks in the name of a universality in which each must participate alone—that is, death. The name of “thanatography”⁸² finds its way back to autotheory by accident, but in retrospect, the accident looks like it was always coming.

What—I cough, exhausted and choking on exhaust—drives me to continue (to write this)?

Vita Nova

Let us turn away, for now, and return to the question of a *vita nova*. Do we still dream of an-other, new way of life and writing?

Regarding autotheory's future, Fournier looks toward autotheory's others, writing in the hope that “the singular can be a gateway to the multiple.”⁸³ This would be to practice an autotheory that could meaningfully address “Indigenous justice and [...] ecological justice (both linked to the survival and futurity of life on Earth).”⁸⁴ The abstract, universal “I” would, through a practice of writing, be transformed into a coalitional circle of

82 Ibid., 210.

83 Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, 276.

84 Ibid., 273.

specific, personal voices, and, Fournier argues, “in theorizing together we may, after all, hear ourselves.”⁸⁵

I would like to agree. And in that hopeful spirit, allow me to conclude by looking once again to autotheory’s other that is the novel. Though it be an extravagant departure, I ask that this chapter “be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel.”⁸⁶ My dream would be to call that novel *Autotheory and Its Others*. I did not, myself, write the novel (but I might have spoken part of it). To keep that dream alive, albeit suspended, please allow me *not* to conclude — indeed, by not concluding; in place of a conclusion, instead, I want to offer an inconclusive trajectory. Here, I mimic (a new) life; I play at performing intimacy, disclosure, immediacy, and so on in the form of a voice-typed manuscript from one of my morning commutes:

Testamentary Fragments: A Postscript, a Transcription

[...] a theory that the text is like a genre-indifferentiated body but I think what it actually then means is a proliferation or a withdrawing or a complication of genre cues that indicate a willingness to equivocate using the cues that structure a genre and this is really what the novel always tries to do

to put the expectations of genre into a different matrix so like if the genre of a psychiatric report was put into conversation with personal narrative in order to show the artificiality of the authority behind the report’s genre

it’s supposed to represent scientific discipline but once it becomes fiction it can’t do that anymore even though the words are the same the author is the same some literal meaning is presumably the same but detached from its context now it’s something else what is it now it’s fiction but not quite

⁸⁵ Ibid., 276.

⁸⁶ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 2010), 1.

autotheory then above all names not a genre but an approach to the problem of genre and that approach is acknowledgment of subjectivity the acknowledgment of fictionality as a feature that ultimately cannot be totally disciplined within a text or given an absolutely determinate meaning but rather remains in play even in the most scientific text fictionality is as ineliminable from testimony as reality is in the voice of fiction

so the other genre that might appear to be hidden somehow within the novel and the essay is the literary as such since texts remain vulnerable to literary strategies of reading they also remain open to literary strategies of writing so then what becomes of discipline well it can still be exercised but not fully the point of this is not to deface academic discourses or juridical discourses other discourses of seriousness they remain practicable along with the hazards that they always held what we are trying to do is make the full body of reading the full range of strategies that belong to reading available to writing in other contexts in this way autotheory also becomes a pedagogy it becomes the pedagogy of reading equivocation seriously a kind of literacy that is far from unknown and that has been practiced in the interstices always but not always with a name not always with a pedagogy so this is to bring other habits of reading and writing into a new relation with one another and with the institution

if there is an experimental aspect to this the experiment is in seeing what becomes of our disciplines if we agree to permit a greater degree of indiscipline to mark them at the level of genre it seems to me that it can no longer be held back because authority as such only looks more and more ridiculous with the passage of time and as humanity demonstrates its incapacity to deal with its existential crises or to resolve the most basic contradictions of its shared existence

literature testifies to the intimate relation to language it makes profound intimacy available that otherwise never would be it seems to offer a dream to Barthes this is the fantasy the shared

space and the private space the conversion of the private into the shared do we dare say without remainder that we could attain a perfect intimacy with another person through language but what else might being understood even mean

and what would be at the bottom of that intimacy total assurance of the existence of another mind total identification total recognition of the self in the other and the other in the self and the other and the other and the self in the self etc. etc. proliferating perfect mirror images in a perfectly transparent language resulting in the dissolution of subjecthood into an even more totalizing subjecthood

and yet testimony remains as the possibility of intimacy with another a surprise that something could come into oneself that is different that does not originate in the self but represents a radical break against the background of the same how does the one give birth to the other and then why is this a matter of genre because in conventional academic writing intimacy is forbidden

but then academic writing never promised a new life and literature could still seem to promise that and moreover it is pretty to think so

and that is exactly why we want it for the indiscipline of experience

Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press, 2017.
- Barthes, Roland. "An Almost Obsessive Relation to Writing Instruments." In *The Grain of the Voice*, translated by Linda Coverdale. University of California Press, 1991.
- . "From Speech to Writing." In *The Grain of the Voice*, translated by Linda Coverdale. University of California Press, 1991.
- . "From Taste to Ecstasy." In *The Grain of the Voice*, translated by Linda Coverdale. University of California Press, 1991.
- . "From Work to Text." In *Image Music Text*, translated by Stephen Heath. Hill and Wang, 1977.
- . *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Translated by Richard Howard. Hill and Wang, 2010.
- . *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by Richard Miller. Noonday Press, 1975.
- . *The Preparation of the Novel*. Edited by Nathalie Léger. Translated by Kate Briggs. Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Brown, Andrew. *Roland Barthes: The Figures of Writing*. Clarendon, 1992.
- Compagnon, Antoine. "Roland Barthes's Novel," translated by Rosalind Krauss. *October* 112 (2005): 23–34. DOI: 10.1162/0162287054223891.
- Culler, Jonathan. "Preparing the Novel: Spiraling Back." *Paragraph* 31, no. 1 (2008): 109–20. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/238194>.
- Daffron, Eric. "Interstitial Living: Fragments towards an Ethics." *European Journal of Life Writing* 11 (2022): 32–64. DOI: 10.21827/ejlw.11.37967.
- Fournier, Lauren. *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. MIT Press, 2022.
- Pint, Kris. "How to Become What One Is: Roland Barthes's Final Fantasy." *Paragraph* 31, no. 1 (2008): 38–49. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43151868>.

- Pint, Kris, and Maria Gil Ulldemolins. "Roland Barthes and the 'Affective Truths' of Autotheory." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 53, no. 4 (2020): 117–32. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27092987>.
- "Statistics." *Insurance Corporation of British Columbia (ICBC)*. <https://www.icbc.com/about-icbc/newsroom/Pages/Statistics.aspx>.
- Thirlwell, Adam. "My Novel, My Novel." *The New Republic*, December 7, 2010. <https://newrepublic.com/article/79745/novel-roland-barthes-realism>.
- Widiss, Benjamin. *Obscure Invitations: The Persistence of the Author in Twentieth-Century American Literature*. Stanford University Press, 2011.
- Wiegman, Robyn. "Introduction: Autotheory Theory." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 76, no. 1 (2020): 1–14. DOI: 10.1353/arq.2020.0009.

The Queer Genre of Autocollage: Juxtaposing Fragments of Autotheory as a Way of Navigating the Unscripted Life

Emilio Williams

In recognizing autocollage as my first experiment in self-unsaying, I conceive autotheory as primarily a form-seeking endeavor.

— Lynne Huffer, “Respite: 12 Anthropocene Fragments”¹

One: Making It Visible

A Family Album

Washington, DC. Very early in the first Obama administration, I was in the middle of an impossible transatlantic move, another life transition, this time in my mid-thirties. An older gay couple in their late seventies adopted me and often invited me over to enjoy lavish, homemade, Southern-style dinners: collard greens,

¹ Lynne Huffer, “Respite: 12 Anthropocene Fragments,” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 76, no. 1 (2020): 170.

biscuits with gravy, and fried chicken or meatloaf. The teasing always started during the actual dinner. By dessert, the *oeuvre d'art* in question would be unveiled: the famous Cock Collage. This was an evolving piece of framed vernacular art composed of dozens — many, many dozens — of cutout penises pasted in one promiscuous cluster. The provenance of the images was not pornographic magazines but rather amateur nude photos of their actual friends. The couple, elders with a patina of respectability, also inserted cutouts of their own genitals as personal contributions to the collage. This perpetual work-in-progress had been in the making since the 1970s, and some additions to this wall of fame were, apparently, very recent. If you got the couple drunk enough, which was not difficult, some of the names behind the cutouts would be revealed, including some salacious details, such as who was a “shower” and who was a “grower” or even which penis ended up where after one party or another. I eventually lost touch with that beautiful couple of queer elders. Yet I think of them often because chances are that they are no longer with us. And now, I must admit, I regret that a cutout picture of my member never made it into their famous Cock Collage.

The Collage of Queer Histories

Walter Benjamin said that the revolutionary classes blast the continuum of history,² and queer people may have been one of the most revolutionary groups in recent North Atlantic history. Like a revolutionary class, collage, in its visual and textual forms, blasts things apart. It liberates queer people from conventional chronologies so that we can connect the fragments of our past existence, ones that were never afforded the luxury of preservation or a well-documented history. The collage dis-

2 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Schocken Books, 1969), 253–64. For a queer perspective and application that expanded my understanding of Benjamin’s theories, see Dianne Chisholm, *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

rupts the binaries of before and after, and that form well suits those of us whose lives refuse to comply with rigid corsets of hetero expectations.³ Growing up with a different set of desires and longings made me very aware of the pressure to conform with timelines that I had no interest in following. That ingrained biographical script is particularly salient in regulating sexuality: This is when you are supposed to have sex, and where, and with whom, and how, and this is when you are supposed to have sex in order to procreate, and this is when you are supposed to marry and stop having sex with others, and this is when it is okay for you to stop having sex even with your life partner, and this is when you never talk about sex ever again, and this is when and where you do not use the word “cock” or talk about other people’s cocks — which is never. At this stage of the sexual liberation movement, it has been clearly established that these regulations have not worked well for straight people either.

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall...

I am collaging my own memories. Next to the Cock Collage from Obama-era Washington, DC, I paste another visual collage — this one from downtown New York in the 1970s. I discovered it recently while browsing through a book in a public library in Chicago. It is an early artifact of Robert Mapplethorpe, a mirror framed by a collage of penises.⁴ My old friends would have loved this idea for their cock collage. This object could also serve as both a shrine to a multigenerational history of gay joy and as a practical joke but, whether shrine or joke, one that could also function as a handy conduit for self-reflecting

3 The most often cited articulation of this phenomena within queer studies is in Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (NYU Press, 2005), 1. I have also utilized these theories by Benjamin and Halberstam in my recent queer history of the avant-garde Black Mountain College. See Emilio Williams, “Fragments of a Vessel: Notes towards Further Queer Histories of Black Mountain College,” *Journal of Black Mountain College Studies* 14 (2023), <https://www.blackmountaincollege.org/journal/volume-14/williams/>.

4 Robert Mapplethorpe, “Untitled. Mirror with Photo Collage on Frame,” in *Early Works 1970–1974* (Robert Miller, 1991), 14.

masturbation. In this mirror, the user can insert himself, herself, or themselves into the collage in real time and in movement. I wonder how many straight critics may have missed the potential autoeroticism of the Mapplethorpe prank.

Meet Hostius Quadra

Seneca the Younger was outraged by the behavior of Hostius Quadra. According to the Roman philosopher, Quadra had a distorting mirror that would make a finger look the size of an arm. He would have the best-endowed men from the baths come to his home to penetrate him from behind while he would watch them in the mirror that reflected their members as far bigger than they were. Sometimes Quadra engaged in such self-reflective sex with men and women simultaneously. In *Natural Questions*, Seneca even passed the microphone to this perceived pervert, giving him a fake first-person testimonial, as if he had given the author an interview: "All my members are occupied in acts of debauchery: let my eyes have a share in my lust as well and be its witnesses and inspectors."⁵ Seneca was so outraged by Quadra's behavior that he justified his brutal death at the hands of his enslaved men. Seneca theorized in detail about all the taboos Quadra was shattering. The most important, perhaps, was that he was immodest — he displayed his sexual acts while looking at them. (Even in the pornographic frescos of the Pompeii brothel, men and women kept their clothing on while having sex.) Peter G. Toohey has established that for Seneca, Quadra's biggest crime was making the invisible visible.⁶

Proust's Collaged Genre

Like Quadra, Proust tried to make the invisible visible in *Remembrance of Things Past*, a novel of novels. And like Quadra's mirror, Proust's pen created in his fiction a distorted, exagger-

5 Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Natural Questions*, trans. Harry M. Hine (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 160.

6 Peter G. Toohey, *Melancholy, Love, and Time: Boundaries of the Self in Ancient Literature* (University of Michigan Press, 2004), 263–64.

ated version of his real life. In his tribute to Proust, Walter Benjamin famously stated, “It has rightly been said that all great works of literature found a genre or dissolve one.”⁷ In creating a hybrid, collage genre, Proust combined “fiction, autobiography, and commentary in one.” In my native Spanish, the word for genre and gender is the same, *género*. So, for me, dissolving the expectations of a genre sounds the same as dissolving the expectations of a gender. Proust’s pasting together fragments of his existence and imagination and also other people’s artwork results in a final form that meanders but culminates in an epic tale that feels like or tries to feel like a complete whole. (Benjamin called it “a Nile of words.”⁸) Proust utilizes his personal experiences as a springboard for philosophical riffs. In fact, we can read the Proustian enterprise as an early form of queer autotheory.

Fragments of Truth

The section “Swann in Love” from the first Proustian volume is so much a novel within the novel that sometimes it is published as a separate, self-contained book. There I find the perfect example of queer autotheory, distorted by the concave mirror of fiction: Proust is clearly injecting his autotheory of the fragmented queer life into the fictional experience of Odette. Odette carries on multiple secret affairs, and Swann bullies her into admitting some of them. The bullying forces Odette to begin equivocating when asked about her affairs, particularly those with women, for the safety of everyone involved, maybe including Swann’s itself. Answering Swann’s jealous cross-examination, she offers fragments of truth collaged with invention, thinking those actual details would make her stories more realistic. The narrator explains:

7 Walter Benjamin, “The Image of Proust,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt, 201.

8 Ibid.

She had not taken into account that this fragmentary detail of the truth had sharp edges which could not be made to fit in, except to those contiguous fragments of the truth from which she had arbitrarily detached it, edges which, whatever the fictitious details in which she might embed it, would continue to shew, by their overlapping angles and by the gaps which she had forgotten to fill, that its proper place was elsewhere.⁹

Some piece of information, some details must be covered up for self-protection when interacting with others not in on the fictive acts. Any dissident sexuality makes its practitioner's life and its retelling fragmentary.

Road to Liberation

Proust, a man having sex with other men during Paris's belle époque, had to cover his tracks under the disguise of fiction. Fragments of his truths, of his theories of self, had to be distorted with mirrors of fiction. And with white lies. Fictionalization, in art, and white lies, in real life, protect the author and others, helping the queer person to save face and to avoid implicating others in the illicit conduct. "I lived my life in fragments," writes Richard Rodriguez. "For I knew nothing was so dangerous in the world as love, my kind of love."¹⁰ Proust noted that in Odette's attempt to cover up her bisexual affairs, fictional fragments combined with autobiography can make an edifice crumble. Queer writers and visual artists in the twentieth century liberated themselves by pivoting from the autofiction of Proust and other novelists, who had to distort facts for safety, to

9 Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff (Random House, 1934), 214.

10 Richard Rodriguez, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (Penguin, 2002), 206. I have also written on the fragmented essay as a queer genre. See Emilio Williams, "Inside the Box: On Queering the Fragment," *Brevity*, January 15, 2022, <https://brevitymag.com/craft-essays/queering-the-fragment/>.

an autotheory, both in writing and visual form, that finally made the invisible clearly visible.

Two: Cruising as Collage, Collage as Cruising

Furtive Fragments

In the heteronormative worldview, cruising counts for less than a fully realized experience. Yet queer folks would beg to differ. It is true that, invariably, these fleeting nighttime encounters are fragmented, promiscuous; some are just a beginning, others are only a climax, and, with still others, they end before they start. If recounted or remembered, they are never a straight narrative or a complete memory. Yet each of these furtive encounters forms a collage, one composed of fragments blasted with revolutionary energy. In its obsession with the so-called Aristotelian climactic structures, patriarchy fails to recognize that a life fragmented or collaged can also be fully realized and, in many ways, much more valid and truthful than a monogamous heterosexual romantic tale with a beginning, middle, and happy ending. "For gay men, the truth about our lives seems to resist taxonomy in some fundamental manner," writes Kevin Killian.¹¹

On Bad Knees and Shrewdness

I love how carefully designed gay sex clubs are, how they simulate the night outdoors, indoors: a gate, a labyrinth, the dimmed lights. Thank God for the dimmed lights! The leather sex club is a theme park house ride, a slice of the outdoors at night cut and pasted into the safety of a backroom or a basement. I am standing next to my partner in the playground of a Chicago leather bar. We lean against a metal wire fence separating nothing from nothing. I toy with his member, not so much jerking him off but handling his member in the way one shakes dice with one hand before rolling them. A guy a few years older than I walks by us and praises my guy's asset.

11 Kevin Killian, "Prologue," in Matias Viegner, *2500 Random Things about Me Too* (Les Figues Press, 2012), 8.

"It's so big!!!" (OK, it is.) "It's so big!!!" (OK!)

The guy reaches over his shoulder for a purple backbag. "I have something really big, too," he says, the flirt, getting ready to pull a trick out of his bag.

"Oh, God, a dildo?" I say with a mix of shock and wishful thinking.

"No," he answers very seriously while pulling out a portable, folding step. He unfolds the step, sits on it, and proceeds to give my partner a blow job. In the fleeting moment that it takes me to readjust my jaw, the stranger takes my partner's dick out of his mouth and, looking up at me, explains himself very matter-of-factly: "You know, I've got bad knees."

Auto-theorizing Cruising

If there is an imminent danger of being caught in the act, efficiency — cutting to the chase — is a priority. And, yet, the rewards of finding another man also looking for sex in the middle of the night can be in the means as much as in the ends. Like those fishermen who catch and release, sometimes the fun can simply be in the process leading up (or not) to a climax. Roland Barthes, the autotheorist who sometimes made the visible invisible, but more often only translucid, underlined his particular interest in the groundwork that he laid for the pleasure of gay sexual hunting: "the cruising, the alert, the signals, the approach, the conversation, the departure for the bedroom." In the same way he obsessed, in his final lectures, with the preparation required to write a novel, Barthes seemed to be more interested in the prolegomenon to sex than in the actual main dish.¹²

Under the Guillotine

I first read David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991) in the 1990s. I was in my twenties then, living under the ever-present guillotine of AIDS. At that time, I processed Wojnarowicz's account of sexual freedom as a hor-

12 Roland Barthes, "Introduction," in Renaud Camus, *Tricks: 25 Encounters*, trans. Richard Howard (St. Martin's Press, 1981), viii.

ror movie whose ending I knew well. I vividly remember the phantasmagorical images in the book's cruising passages: light and shadows, figures flickering in and out of sight in New York's waterfront warehouses. A sensation that reminded me of the dark back rooms of gay bars in my native Madrid, where people now and then flicked a lighter to see what was transpiring underneath the obscurity. That gesture with the lighter makes the invisible visible in flashed fragments. Rereading the book now, I realize that it runs like a moving collage, or a film dappled with the light of a strobe and plagued with jump cuts. "So simple," he writes, "the appearance of night in a room full of strangers, the maze of hallways wandered as in films, the fracturing of bodies from darkness into light."¹³ Fragmentation is the core metaphor of Wojnarowicz's autotheories of cruising: "These fragmented pieces of the world are turned and pressed into memory before they can register in the brain. Fantasized images are made up of millions of disjointed observations collected and collated into the forms and textures of thought."¹⁴ So frequently does Wojnarowicz invoke the fragment that I am tempted to make my own collage out of his variations on the word fragment: "These fragmented pieces of the world";¹⁵ "things are like fragmented mirrors of what I perceive";¹⁶ "two fragments of dreaming I can recall";¹⁷ "sight and sound became fragmented";¹⁸ "frozen fragments of faces";¹⁹ "the billion or more fragments of my living";²⁰ "what fragments of his existence survive";²¹ "I recalled fragmented sentences and images";²² "images floating and shifting

13 David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (Open Road Media, 1991), 9.

14 Ibid., 26.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., 157.

17 Ibid., 61.

18 Ibid., 54.

19 Ibid., 182.

20 Ibid., 274.

21 Ibid., 252.

22 Ibid., 228.

into fragments.”²³ On and on he goes, making use of more than twenty-five images of fragmentation in a single book.

Ancestors

In my very early teens, I remember digging into literature and art, always searching for clues that would help me detect in others urges similar to mine. Federico García Lorca was the first man from whom I received confirmation. We were studying his poems in a literature class, and another student under his breath outed him with a hateful expletive. It was hard to believe, I thought, because, if Lorca were truly “that,” we would not be studying him in class. I talked to a friend a year older than I who was an honors student in another, more progressive school. He confirmed that Lorca indeed was “that.” Apparently, my friend, the swot, had read in some encyclopedia about different ways in which people of the same sex could get pleasure. He had also learned that homosexuals rub their penises against each other’s for pleasure. That sounded even more absurd than having a priest lecture on the poems of a “you-know-what.” My friend also knew of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas as an example of that kind of couple — “You know,” he said, “but when women do it...” It is through those admirable literary figures that I learned homosexuality was more than a playground insult. Years later, in my early twenties, I had a postcard photo of Stein and Toklas pinned to my wall, the way a straight boy of my age would have placed in his bedroom a revealing photograph of Claudia Schiffer. Wojnarowicz found in the *poète maudit* Arthur Rimbaud his ideal ancestor, another precocious boy who, like Wojnarowicz and like me, loved older men and lived a dangerous life, another boy looking for sexual ancestries. Rimbaud reappears in the late 1970s around New York in a series of photographs that Wojnarowicz took, apparently of himself, wearing a face mask of the French poet.²⁴ The photographs are a docu-

²³ Ibid., 36.

²⁴ See David Wojnarowicz, “Arthur Rimbaud in New York,” Gelatin silver print on paper, 1978–1979/Posthumous print, 2004, Museo Reina Sofia,

mentation of a performance in which Wojnarowicz has collaged himself with Rimbaud. This series by Wojnarowicz seems to act as a reembodiment of the traditional family album. "Look, in this photo you're the spitting image of your grandfather!"

Supreme Vice

On the front cover of *Le Journal*, the headline from 1910, reads, "Invertis et Pervertis." In the story that follows, this Parisian newspaper calls the public urinals of the city a school for the apprenticeship of the *vice suprême*:

What shameful things covered [the urinals], if you do not know, believe me rather than go and see for yourself! The inverts are not content with just making these places one of their meeting places; they write to each other there, using advertisement posters to make followers by contagion.²⁵

The homoerotic bathroom graffiti was already at work in the belle époque. Gay men, like early cavemen, were leaving messages behind as proof of existence to one another and as a form of challenge to the homophobes. Now, I search the archive for guiding lights sent by my cruisy ancestors in the form of collages made of fragmented images and texts. I find more clues in the photographs and memories of Hungarian-born French photographer Brassai. In the 1930s, Brassai took beautiful photos of the Parisian *pissoirs* at night. In the 1970s, he remembered them in his book *The Secret Paris of the 30's*:

At nightfall public toilets lit up like little chapels subjected to strange forms of worship. So many kiosks, so many places for homosexuals to gather and fraternize, especially around

Madrid, <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/arthur-rimbaud-new-york-28>.

²⁵ Lucien Descaves, "Invertis et Pervertis," *Le Journal*, March 2, 1910, 1, also referenced in Michael D. Sibal, "Paris," in *Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories Since 1600*, ed. David Higgs (Routledge, 1999), 27–49. I use my translation from the French in this quotation.

the urinals with three stalls, whose circular layout permitted contact between men.²⁶

Brassaï sees the men coming in and out of the public restrooms as dancers in a nocturnal ballet. Cruising as a beautiful performance. Bathroom graffiti as a form of cave art. Beauty in the toilets. Cruising as work of art.

The Glue That Binds Us

In 2013, the visual artist Richard Hawkins wrote a fragmented, collaged essay on the gay personal scrapbook with the felicitous title of “Glue and Cum.” Hawkins also proposed the collage as a form of curating the fragments of queer existence, one that can combine the artist’s own life, and sexual experiences, with found erotic images:

The erotic material, having been in use up to this point ... the ordinarily onanistic eye turns into the editing eye, snipping away all the extraneous, less stimulating material ... cruising, in a word, flipping through, fingering ... to ultimately create a best-of-done-been-had trick list, memorializing trophies.²⁷

All those ellipses and hyphens are in a literal transcription of his text, as if the writer had taken fragmented texts and words and had glued them together in one long, collaged sentence. For Hawkins, the gay visual collage is a form to memorialize and mix both one’s real and one’s dreamed cruising. And then, there is the written collage, a form that can be used to autotheorize on art, life, and cruising.

26 Brassaï, *The Secret Paris of the 30’s*, trans. Richard Miller (Pantheon Books, 1976), 54.

27 Richard Hawkins, “Glue and Cum,” in *Paperwork: A Brief History of Artists’ Scrapbooks*, ed. Andrew Roth and Alex Kitnick (PPP Editions, 2013), 149.

Still Cruising after All of These Years

"Just sex" is fabulous on its own merits, do not get me wrong. However, when a man has sex with another man, it is rarely just sex. When two or more bodies meet in the night, in a public space, to have anonymous sex with each other, there is the potential to temporarily blast the barriers of age, class, race, nation, and even language. Barriers that most likely will divide us again at sunrise but that will reappear the next morning with subtle chips and cracks. Case in point: Once upon a time in a forest.... Wait. I need to give some more context first. You must know my partner has many endearing quirks. One of them is that he loves getting fucked in public. It happens in the best of queer families. Anyway. I am passionately fulfilling my top duties inside him, in a forest, at night, when I notice a shadowy shape slowly coming out of the bushes. This is the moment, of course, where I pick up the pace of my thrust, that proverbial queer performativity, right? Dear reader, the only thing better than queer theory is queer praxis! In no time, my partner comes, so I pull out and shoot my load to the wind, like confetti. The anonymous figure comes forward and becomes a bit clearer under the moonlight: a fully naked, short, very lean, silver-daddy type. The guy approaches us and tries to outman me (me?) with a louder, splashier ejaculation. If mine is confetti, his is a Chinese New Year celebration. Some men can be so competitive! Another one of my partner's quirks is that he always praises a well-finished job.

"Wow! Well, done, pal," he says to the older guy.

The stranger gloats in satisfaction and, a bit too loudly, replies, "And you know what? I'm ninety years old!"

The God of Encounters

The most openly queer of all surrealists, René Crevel, called the life force that unites two strange men in the night "the god of encounters."²⁸ And like our ancestors before us and like those who will come after us — even if our knees fail us, even if we

28 René Crevel, *My Body and I*, trans. Robert Bononno (Steerforth Press, 2005), 55.

turn ninety — until climate change fries or drowns us all (in public restrooms, in parks, in sex clubs, in saunas, on river walks around the world), we will walk as horny pilgrims pleading for a miracle, just one more fragment of a miracle from the god of encounters, while the homophobes sleep in their sexless homes dreaming up their disgusting antiquer laws or how to ban our books.

Three: Embodied Collages

No Abuse of the Self, Please!

When I was growing up, some of the priests at the Catholic school I attended euphemistically called masturbation “self-abuse.” Please, do not blame any grown-up Catholic who may engage in complex ways with the binary of pleasure and pain. It is complicated for us. The famous Passion, for example, is not explicitly about love and pleasure but is instead the most gruesome story of death by torture that we were told as kids, time after time.

I am writing a paper positioning the queer vernacular collage at the hinge of modernism and postmodernism, and so I am pitching my ongoing research to editors. A significant US art journal has developed an initiative to be more inclusive. (Are we not grateful?) Through this initiative, the journal’s staff members teach those writers they want to include how to write an academic paper the way they like them. Evaluation criteria include “logical organization” and “clear and concise writing.” Thus, no fragmentation, no collage writing, no blasting the continuum of anything. Logical to whom? Clear to whom? Concise why? What is equitable, diverse, and inclusive about taming the voice and the style of the outsider? The editor, a well-intentioned and seemingly sweet lady, advises me that if I were to use the first-person voice in an essay, I should never abuse it. Abuse as in overuse? I guess a bit of a first-person voice can be palatable for academia, but too much is just simply not serious. One cannot be rigorous in the first person. In that understanding of content and form, an excessive use of the first person is masturba-

tory — in a bad way, I take it to mean. If Barthes were alive today and were to send a blind submission to any of these American journals, ones that relish citations from his work, he would, no doubt, be rejected.

Vernacular Theory

In 1988, British playwright Neil Bartlett first published *Who Was That Man?*, the groundbreaking study of Oscar Wilde that became a blueprint for researching and communicating new knowledge about queer lives. In his study of Wilde, Bartlett, a nonprofessional historian, queered historical methodologies and straightforward forms of historiography to deploy a collage of autotheories of both his and the larger queer experience: “I subject the story of my own life as a gay man to constant scrutiny; we all do. We have to because we’re making it up as we go along.”²⁹ That we are making it up as we go along seems to be the perfect articulation of the queer need to autotheorize: to funnel any existential musings through the experiences of one’s own body and life. In form, Bartlett’s book itself replicates a collage, one inspired by the scrapbooks he used to build his research. Clippings from primary sources (journals, letters, and books) are juxtaposed with decorative illustrations of, for example, flowers. Parataxis of text with text, of text with image is deployed, letting things acquire meaning by being next to each other and showing, not telling, the complex interconnections of the queer vernaculars. In one memorable passage, a chronological list of quotes from 1894 to 1980 relates to a certain queer eye, a sensitivity among men who seduce other men, that allows them to curate interiors, rooms, and walls, and to organize disparate collected objects, images, and memories into a harmonious tableau.³⁰ Or should I say a scrapbook? Or a collage? Or Bartlett’s book? Or a gay man’s life?

29 Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (Serpent’s Tail, 1988), 30.

30 *Ibid.*, 178–80.

On Objectivity

My dirty truth: I am unable to approach some of my research with a cool, objective attitude. I have a personal attachment to the characters in my research, ones with whom I am so obsessed that I want to spend hours thinking of them, or reading their books, or diving into their archives. I look at their portraits — a Wojnarowicz, a Peter Hujar, a Greer Lankton — and my gaze becomes a complex collage: I see them as a fan, a descendant, a bereaved lover, or a brother-in-arms. I feel at turns, or at once, sorrow, grief, inspiration, arousal. How can an interpreter of the humanities care so much for a subject and still be expected to perform objectivity? Because, let us face it, in the humanities, and in art criticism, the patriarchal academic objectivity is just a kabuki act with bad — really bad — makeup.

Her Legs

I met Lankton through a close-up of her beautiful, long legs. It was a portrait photograph by Hujar. Then I looked her up. Google. More photos by Hujar and later some wedding photographs by Nan Goldin: Lankton as a traditional bride in white and her green-haired groom, Paul Monroe, in a white tux. Lankton was a stunning woman with the charisma that one attributes to Hollywood stars of its golden age. She was not merely a muse and a model but an artist in her own right. Her sculptures were supersized dolls, grotesque, disquieting, built with infinite care and virtuosity. The list of materials she used — found dolls, “wire, metal eye-joints, wood, plaster, fabric”³¹ — makes clear that these artifacts are three-dimensional collages. In an interview with Lankton, the cultural critic Carlo McCormick praised “the interchangeable parts, particularly the sex organs,”³² seeing in them a representation of gender identity as a dynamic, interactive practice of fragmented attributes. Although the dolls are not always self-portraits, Lankton stated, “sometimes they end

31 Greer Lankton, “My Life Is Art,” interview by Carlo McCormick, *East Village Eye* 5, no. 49 (1984): 18.

32 Ibid.



Fig. 6.1. First page of a life-long collection of photobooth portraits taken in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s by Greer Lankton. Photo Album, The Greer Lankton Collection, Mattress Factory Museum, Pittsburgh, PA.

up looking like me ... or the way I'd like to look."³³ And still the dolls are far from being idealized forms. They seem cartoonish, at times comically grotesque, at other times darkly grotesque. Lankton's bodily anxieties and hopes project onto the dolls a form of collage, or, as trans scholar Susan Stryker provocatively claimed, the trans body as a Frankenstein-like flesh-and-bone assemblage.³⁴

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," *GLQ* 1, no. 3 (1994): 237–54.

The Photo Booth as Confessionary

Diving into Lankton's digital archives at the Mattress Factory, I find another poignant use of collage as queer autotheory. In a photo album, she collects photo booth portraits of herself taken throughout her life (fig. 6.1).³⁵ All of the photos are pasted into the pages of the album as grids, or as a living mosaic, a collage documenting the passing of time in one body, an autobiography of evolution and change, a history of how a face can present itself to the world in the very eras of a lifetime: from a cheerful, playful prepubescent boy in the late 1960s, to an androgynous teenager in the 1970s, to a grown-up femme who could aspire to be a top model in the 1980s. The photos also reveal some of the surgical interventions and suggest the effects of hormonal treatments on this body. The evolutions are presented not as a straight chronology of her life but rather as a meandering journey. One that seems to honor all the biographical milestones. One that complicates the before and the after. The photos seem to be at times a rehearsal, at other times a documentary of fact, and at still other times, an experiment in existence. In one photo, she shows herself with facial hair, with the caption "A feeble attempt at growing a beard."³⁶ Most often she appears alone, but, in some cases, she includes family members, friends, and sweethearts lovingly posing next to her. Seventy-six pages in total. One lifetime. Many theories of what its protagonist was or could be.

Sweethearts

The beauty of queerness is that it can do two apparently contradictory things at the same time. The following collage object is a complete spoof, a parody of heteronormative love. And, as it happens in the best of the proverbial camp, it is also a tribute, a way to claim an earnest showing of romantic love. In an email

35 Photo Album by Greer Lankton, c. 1975–c. 1990, GL.PA.00001, The Greer Lankton Collection, The Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, PA, <https://lankton.mattress.org/Detail/objects/32396>. Hereafter cited as Photo Album, The Greer Lankton Collection.

36 Photo Album, The Greer Lankton Collection, 11.



Fig. 6.2. Selection of 5 × 5 in. self-portrait drawings of Greer Lankton as variations of a xeroxed photograph of the artist, indented as GL.2D.583, GL.2D.586, GL.2D.587, GL.2D.588.1. The Greer Lankton Collection, Mattress Factory Museum, Pittsburgh, PA.

reply to my inquiry, Monroe, who lived with Lankton from 1984 to 1992, referred me to his Instagram page to find a photograph of this artifact.³⁷ It is a gift, a wedding album of sorts, that Lankton made for Monroe to commemorate their one-year wedding anniversary. In collage form, it covers a red, heart-shaped choc-

37 @greer_lankton_archives_museum, "Heart Shaped Collage: Greer Lankton 1988, a gift from Greer on our 1-year anniversary," *Instagram*, March 24, 2018, https://www.instagram.com/p/Bgtgb5Vn_k8/.

olate box. On one side, loving and glamorous shots of the bride and groom as blond as they ever were. On the other side, photos from the wedding combined with the faces of guests, friends, and family. In queerness, now and then, one gets to have the wedding cake and eat it, too.

Autospeculation

In another area of Lankton's archive, I find a series of self-portrait drawings. These drawings seem to be based on a xeroxed, five-by-five close-up photograph of the artist's face.³⁸ Here, Lankton imagines different potential versions of herself. In one version, she is a glam-rock drag queen, in another she is a Garboesque, mysterious femme. In the series, she seems to be performing different versions of herself. In one, she is an old bald man with facial hair.³⁹ This last one I find particularly touching because Lankton may be trying to picture how she would have aged if she had never transitioned (fig. 6.2). Like many other queer artists of her generation, she did not live to old age. She was found dead in her Chicago studio at age thirty-eight.

Four: Muscles in Display

Naked Male Torsos

Jean Lorrain, the infamous ambassador from Sodom, was a Parisian belle époque dandy who loved other men and became the nemesis of another snob novelist of the time, Proust, for his insolent insistence on making the invisible visible. Lorrain is now best known for fighting Proust in a duel triggered by his public

38 Self-portrait by Greer Lankton, n.d., mixed media on paper, 5 × 5 in., GL.2D.583, The Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, PA, <https://lankton.mattress.org/Detail/objects/40706>.

39 As glam-rock (GL.2D.586.1); as silent-era movie star (GL.2D.586); as a male presenting with full facial hair (GL.2D.585); as an old male presenting (GL.2D.588.1). For all self-portraits in this archive, see <https://lankton.mattress.org/Detail/collections/2132>.



Fig. 6.3. A photograph of the German culturist Eugene Sandow in the first issue of a popular French physique magazine, *La Culture physique: revue bi-mensuelle illustrée* 1 (February 1904): 43, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k8960026/f49.item.r=La%20Culture%20Physique>.

outing of the author of *Remembrance of Things Past*.⁴⁰ I am still looking for a primary-source account of how Lorrain apparently “attended artists’ balls in outrageous costumes, often escorted by a prize-fighter in tights.”⁴¹ Prize fighters and, later, boxers and culturists were allowed to display their bodies in different states of nudity. Their images were reproduced in “innocent” fitness

40 Douglas W. Alde, “Marcel Proust’s Duel,” *Modern Language Notes* 53, no. 2 (1938): 104–6.

41 “Jean Lorrain, Ambassador from Sodom,” *Gay & Lesbian Review* 30 (2023): 10–12, <https://glreview.org/article/jean-lorrain-ambassador-from-sodom/>.

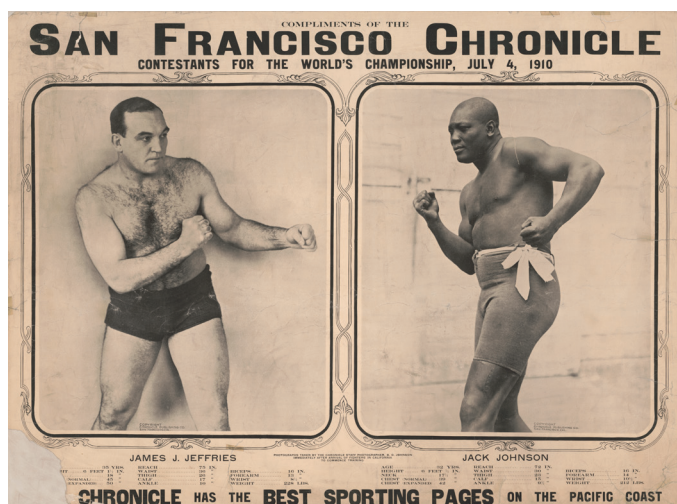


Fig. 6.4. The *San Francisco Chronicle* gave away this poster commemorating the so-called “Fight of the Century” between James J. Jeffries and Jack Johnson. Just one example of how photographs of muscular male torsos became mainstream in the early 20th century. *San Francisco Chronicle*, “Contestants for the World’s Championship, July 4, 1910,” photograph, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/96510782/>.

and health magazines. Fitness guru Bernarr Macfadden started publishing *Physical Culture* in the United States in 1899. A year later, illustrations in the magazine included total male nudity from behind and the side. As early as 1904, *La Culture physique: Revue bi-mensuelle illustrée*, a Parisian publication, included photographs of the celebrity strongman Eugen Sandow posing practically naked (fig. 6.3). These early published nude photographs used lighting, photo montage, and editing techniques that made the contours of the muscular bodies perfect for cutting, like masculine erotized versions of the paper dolls commercialized for young girls. Thanks to the popularity of boxing, the muscles transcended physique magazines, and photographs of naked male torsos became ubiquitous in the popular press.

In 1910, the Black American boxer Jack Johnson fought and won the “fight of the century” against the white fighter James J. Jeffries, an event that caused an international sensation and received ample, bare-chested promotional illustrations and coverage on both sides of the Atlantic (fig. 6.4).

Avant-Garde Queerness

The imagery of the muscular (partially or fully) nude male entered, through pop culture, the imaginary of men who sexually desired other men. A professional Swedish artist, Cösta Adrian-Nilsson, known as “GAN,” painted sailors, athletes, and working-class men between 1914 and 1920. And by 1922, cutouts of these men from magazines and journals started appearing in his avant-garde collages. If the straight men of modernism were taking a break from representing the human form, queer artists such as GAN seemed to be saying, “Wait a minute! We’re not done with the human body yet. We still want to see men flexing muscle.” And so, they cut out revealing images of hunks from magazines and periodicals, pasting them right next to one another in personal scrapbooks, photo albums, and diaries, and even displaying them more boldly on the bookshelves and walls of their homes.

Extraordinary Portrait of the Self

During the Harlem Renaissance era, Max Ewing papered his closet floor to ceiling with photographs. He named this idiosyncratic, architectural scrapbook *The Gallery of Extraordinary Portraits* (fig. 6.5).⁴² It is clearly a form of proto-pop collage. I have seen two photographs of this gallery from the late 1920s or early ’30s. One shows the closet alone. In the other one, Ewing inserts himself in profile, his own extraordinary portrait superimposed on his personal pantheon. Attached with thumbtacks rather than glue, the photos change or move from one place to the other. Thus, the installation is dynamic, fluid. Several semi-

42 Max Ewing Closet Gallery of Extraordinary Portraits, v.1, Max Ewing Collection, YCAL MSS 656, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University Library, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/11692114>.

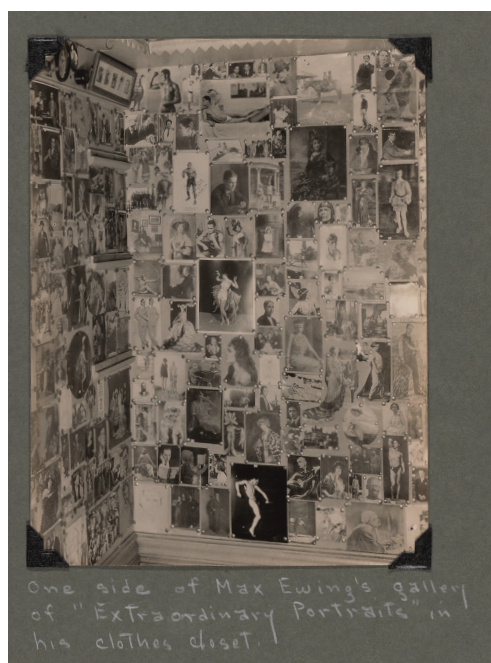


Fig. 6.5. Max Ewing's "Gallery of Extraordinary Portraits", 1928. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/archival_objects/690756.

naked athletes flex their muscles next to photographs of film celebrities, male and female, which are, in turn, next to a portrait of Paul Meeres, a Bahamian sex symbol who had danced with Josephine Baker in Paris and whose seminude photos would be taken by Ewing's friend and co-conspirator Carl Van Vechten. One of the portraits is that of Proust. Another, of Djuna Barnes. I see Jean Cocteau, too. Not every gay man of our time would be able to name a specific celebrity in this or that photo, but I think any of us would easily recognize this collage as the curatorial work of another gay man. What is this man saying, what is he theorizing, about his own life, love, passions, and friends when he covers his closet with imagery so clearly coded and

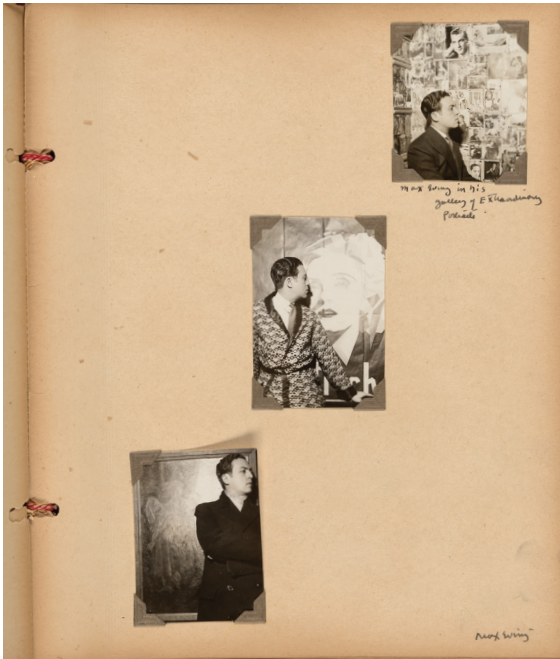


Fig. 6.6. Max Ewing's "Gallery of Extraordinary Portraits," 1928. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/archival_objects/690756.

then inserts himself proudly in that collage? He seems to be both coming out and staying in a closet of ambiguous codes. Less ambiguous may be the positioning of the self-portrait in his personal album. The snapshot of Ewing with his gallery lives on page 49 in a collection of his personal photographs from 1932 (fig. 6.6). In the consecutive page of the same album, Ewing places a photo of the bodybuilder and model Tony Sansone posing naked.⁴³

43 See also Alice T. Friedman, "Max Ewing's Closet and Queer Architectural History (Part 2)," *PLATFORM*, October 21, 2019, <https://www.platform->

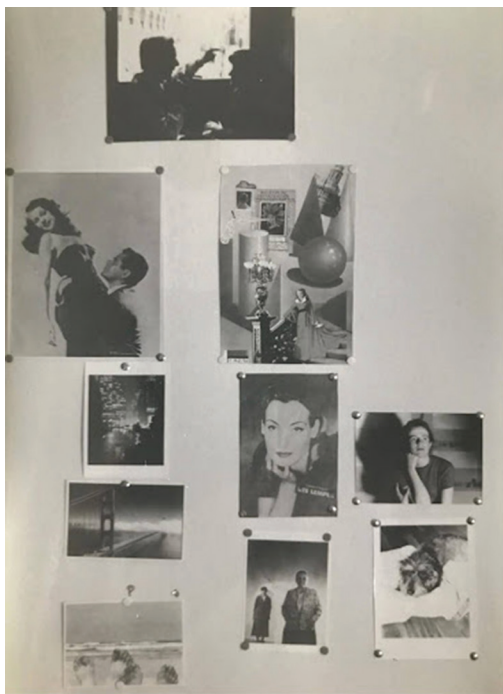


Fig. 6.7. The author's wall in Atlanta, Georgia, 1993.

Another Gallery, Later That Century

The photo of Stein and Toklas has reappeared in a digital photograph of my wall saved from the shipwreck of my lifetime. The original lives lost somewhere in my private archive. This is my own gallery of extraordinary portraits (fig. 6.7). Before I could imagine creating it, another gay man had done something like this in 1930s New York. The black-and-white photo was taken in 1992 in my first apartment as a single man in Atlanta. The images had moved with me from Madrid, and they include a photo of myself in silhouette with my best friend, Tati, a col-

space.net/home/max-ewings-closet-and-queer-architectural-history-part-2.

lage with an image of Vivien Leigh, a promotional shot of the movie *Gilda*, a photo of Stein with Toklas, and several postcards received from friends. The Leigh collage was in color; the rest of the photographs were all black and white. No muscle men.

Joining the Beefcakes

In the early 1950s, the artist known as Jess (Burgess Collins) created the collage *The Mouse's Tale*.⁴⁴ Epic in scale and resonance, the collage shows a flexing muscular figure created out of close to one hundred cutouts of posing "beefcakes" in different degrees of nudity, all in black and white. On the lower side of the giant, a smiling face of Jess himself joins these cutouts from soft-porn gay magazines masquerading as fitness magazines. In front of this black-and-white giant is a mirror, this one framed with grotesque clowns and wild animals. Jonathan Katz calls the central figure "a kind of collective homosexual self-portrait"⁴⁵ and the mirror of clowns a metaphor for the injustices of a straight police and legal system during the us-government-sponsored dirty war against homosexuals, now known as the Lavender Scare. The title references Lewis Carroll's shaped poem from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, whose tail end reads:

"I'll be
judge, I'll
be jury,"
said
cun-
ning
old
Fury:
"I'll

44 Jess, *The Mouse's Tale*, 1951–1954, collage, 47% × 32 in., San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, <https://www.sfmoma.org/art-work/76.102/>.

45 Jonathan D. Katz, David C. Ward, and Jennifer Sichel, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (Smithsonian, 2010), 151.

try
the
whole
cause,
and
con-
demn
you to
death.”⁴⁶

The queer autocollage has become at this juncture a political piece of the highest order. The beefcakes are no longer a dirty secret or a private prank, for they are no longer hiding in any closet, coded. Jess autotheorizes himself here as one piece of a larger cluster. With the placement of his happy face on this communal portrait of naked men, Jess makes the gay autocollage a proud disclosure of communal queerness in all its erotic glory.

Fragments of Secret Desires Revealed

On the personal road from self-recognition to socializing their desires, from the private to the political, queer folks have created textual and visual collages that seem to have as many functions as the fragments that they are made of. Among all those functions, I pick two: the first, a way of understanding oneself, a need to try to interrogate one's otherness and autotheorize it; the second, a playful game of complicity, seduction, and outreach. Collages search for other queer gazes that could recognize in their images and stories reflections of similitude, of kinship, of belonging to a place of safety, where the judgment of society gets pranked, where any threats are not real but role-played, performed for titillating pleasure. I see a mirror flexing and distorting its reflection as a protective shield. I see a body flexing and distorting its muscles as a call to mate, across time and space. I see a need to find and honor a nonbiological ancestry. I see a

46 Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (London, 1866), chap. 3, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/11/11-h/11-h.htm#chap03>.

meandering of cruising words, cruising images, cruising bodies, fragments searching to have forbidden sex with one another. As it was, as it is, and as it will be.

Bibliography

- Alde, Douglas W. "Marcel Proust's Duel." *Modern Language Notes* 53, no. 2 (1938): 104–6. DOI: 10.2307/2912041.
- Barthes, Roland. "Introduction." In Renaud Camus, *Tricks: 25 Encounters*, translated by Richard Howard. St. Martin's Press, 1981.
- Bartlett, Neil. *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde*. Serpent's Tail, 1988.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Translated by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry Zorn. Schocken, 1969.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. London, 1866. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/11/11-h/11-h.htm>.
- Chisholm, Dianne. *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City*. University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- Friedman, Alice T. "Max Ewing's Closet and Queer Architectural History (Part 2)." *PLATFORM*, October 21, 2019. <https://www.platformspace.net/home/max-ewings-closet-and-queer-architectural-history-part-2>.
- @greer_lankton_archives_museum. "Heart Shaped Collage: Greer Lankton 1988, a gift from Greer on our 1-year anniversary." *Instagram*, March 24, 2018. https://www.instagram.com/p/Bgtgb5Vn_k8/.
- Halberstam, Jack. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. NYU Press, 2005.
- Huffer, Lynne. "Respite: 12 Anthropocene Fragments." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 76, no. 1 (2020): 167–96. DOI: 10.1353/arq.2020.0006.
- Katz, Jonathan D., David Ward, and Jennifer Sichel. *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*. Smithsonian, 2010.
- Killian, Kevin. "Prologue." In Matias Viegenser, *2500 Random Things about Me Too*. Les Figues Press, 2012.
- Lankton, Greer. "My Life Is Art." Interview by Carlo McCormick. *East Village Eye* 5, no. 49 (1984): 18–19.

- Proust, Marcel. *Remembrance of Things Past*. Translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff. Random House, 1934.
- Rodriguez, Richard. *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*. Penguin, 2002.
- Roth, Andrew, and Alex Kitnick, eds. *Paperwork: A Brief History of Artists' Scrapbooks*. PPP Editions, 2013.
- Seneca, Lucius. *Natural Questions*. Translated by Harry M. Hine. University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Senelick, Laurence. "Jean Lorrain, Ambassador from Sodom." *Gay & Lesbian Review* 30 (2023): 10–12. <https://glreview.org/article/jean-lorrain-ambassador-from-sodom/>.
- Williams, Emilio. "Fragments of a Vessel: Notes towards Further Queer Histories of Black Mountain College." *Journal of Black Mountain College Studies* 14 (2023). <https://www.blackmountaincollege.org/journal/volume-14/williams/>.
- Wojnarowicz, David. *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*. Open Road, 1991.

“A Lot of Gestures to Unlearn”: Christine Brooke-Rose’s Auto-...practices

Hannah Van Hove¹

Christine Brooke-Rose wrote her last published work, *Life, End of* (2006), when she was in her eighties. At the time of writing it, her health was failing her. In the opening pages, she describes the sensations in her legs engendered by the polyneuritis she is suffering from:

The legs now burn permanently, hot charcoal in the feet creeping up the shins and knees and growing tall, two burning bushes, two pillars of fire for frail support. At every step they flinch wince jerk shirk lapse collapse give way stagger like language when it can't present the exact word needed, the exact spot where to put the foot.²

¹ The research for this chapter was financed by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO — grant number: FWOTM1178).

² Christine Brooke-Rose, *Life, End of* (Carcamet, 2006), 9.

Confined to the two rooms on the ground floor of her home in the village of Cabrières d'Avignon in the South of France, Brooke-Rose is unable to get upstairs or out to her balcony. Despite her body's decline, her mind is mostly sharp. She keeps writing.

The researcher tries to imagine what Brooke-Rose's view might be like.



Fig. 7.1. French landscape. Photo by the author.

(This image here, though shot in France, is not it.)

In Brooke-Rose's fiercely experimental and intertextual novel *Thru* (1975), the line "that is not it at all" is woven through its text,³ echoing the line in T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."⁴

3 For example, after the insertion of a linguistic diagram, the text playfully states: "There should be placards saying: Danger. You are now entering the Metalinguistic Zone [...]. And if one settling a pillow by her head should say that is not what I meant at all that is not it at all you can brusquely scrub the diagram and disappear altogether; though admittedly that is only a manner of speaking since the text has somehow come into existence as an insistant [*sic*] instance." See Christine Brooke-Rose, *Thru*, in *The Christine Brooke-Rose Omnibus: Four Novels* (Carcnet, 1986), 629.

4 "To say: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead, Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all' —

Three questions form the background of this chapter:

In writing one's own life, how does an author try to get at “it”?

In writing (on) theory, how does an author try to get at “it”?

In writing someone else's life, how does an author try to get at “it”?

* * *

“I have always felt a deep prejudice against both autobiography and biographical criticism,” Brooke-Rose states in her final collection of essays, *Invisible Author*. There she reflects on writing her “autobiography,” *Remake* (1996). Presented by her publisher as “an autobiographical novel,”⁵ *Remake* could only be written, Brooke-Rose recounts, after she found the “constraint . . . needed”; namely, “to scrap all personal pronouns and all possessive adjectives.”⁶ She explains how doing without pronouns and possessive adjectives “naturally abolishes the gender problems of he/she, the power problems of I/we, we/they, and the possession problems of my/your/his/her/our/their.”⁷ In employing this constraint, Brooke-Rose extended a mode of writing that has since been referred to as “autofiction in the third person.”⁸ In *Life, End Of*, her last published work,

If one, settling a pillow by her head
Should say: ‘That is not what I meant at all;
That is not it, at all.’ T.S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,”
Poetry 6, no. 3 (1915): 134.

5 Christine Brooke-Rose, *Remake* (Carcenet, 1996), cover blurb.

6 Christine Brooke-Rose, *Invisible Author* (Ohio University Press, 2002), 57. Reflecting on how she started to write what would become *Remake*, Brooke-Rose states, “I wrote down my life as I remembered it, . . . and the result was dreadful. The general formula, to exaggerate a little, was ‘And then . . . I-this, and then . . . I-that.’ . . . All I had done, in fact, was an exercise in (as Plato calls it) rememoration” (55–56).

7 *Ibid.*, 59.

8 See Lorna Martens, “Autofiction in the Third Person, with a Reading of Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Remake*,” in *Autofiction in English*, ed. Hywel Dix (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 49–64.

Brooke-Rose continued to make use of autofictional constraints. Referring to its author as “the old lady,” she explains her preference for this technique in the novel itself:

We’re now flooded with Defoeish first person novels in the narrative mode, or narratives in the present tense, with all its pronouns, when what is needed is the present tense, but without the first person. Dropping subjectivity but retaining immediacy and distance.⁹

Reading the opening pages of her final work, the immediacy and distance created is apparent from the start in Brooke-Rose’s allusion to the process of unlearning that is necessary now in order to be able to get from bedroom to bathroom:

Standing, on its own, without support somewhere, causes a tidal wave of nothingness in the head and a limping rush to the nearest armchair or bed. That means that nothing, nothing at all, no action or gesture, can now be done with two hands, if standing. That’s a lot of gestures to unlearn.¹⁰

This chapter suggests that the concept of unlearning might be a useful way in which to interrogate Brooke-Rose’s contributions to both autofiction and autotheory. The autofictional has already been referred to here and appears to be a helpful way of categorizing both *Remake* and *Life, End of* (as Lorna Martens has suggested).¹¹ Both works foreground the mediated nature of the content of their narratives and are “concerned with the potential overlaps as well as the spaces that fall between such cat-

9 Brooke-Rose, *Life, End of*, 67.

10 Ibid., 7.

11 Martens, “Autofiction in the Third Person,” 56.

egories as truth and imagination.”¹² As such, they can be understood to unlearn the autobiographical pact, as theorized by Philip Lejeune, that “confessional narratives authentically, immediately, and unproblematically represent externally verifiable reality by embedding it in a narrative without interpellation.”¹³ Instead, they draw attention to the fact that the facticity of external reality, its status as incontrovertible fact, is elusive and illusory. Yet autotheory, too, might be a useful prism to look through in a consideration of much of Brooke-Rose’s work. Throughout her oeuvre, Brooke-Rose employs, engages with, and questions literary theory as a discipline and as a method. Thus *Thru*, in which she tried to join the critic and creative writer “in one textual act,”¹⁴ exposes much of (post)structuralist thought as phallogocentric in its privileging of the masculine in the construction of meaning. In her—in many ways autotheoretical—collections of essays, *Stories*, *Theories*, *Things* (1991) and *Invisible Author* (2002), she engages with theory from an embodied perspective, testing its claims against lived experience. Finally, in her late autobiographical fictions, she reflects on narratological theories of narrating the self. Considering her work in relation to autotheory, which, the editors of this book suggest elsewhere, can be understood “as a genre which mixes one’s lived experience with a thoroughgoing engagement with and reflection on theory and art in all its iterations,” is to recognize her experimental writing practice, both in her fiction and her criticism, as one that uses theory and art as “catalyst[s] in a project of unlearning and undoing.”¹⁵

12 Hywel Dix, “Introduction: Autofiction in English: The Story So Far,” in *Autofiction in English*, ed. Hywel Dix (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 13.

13 Ibid.

14 Brooke-Rose, *Life, End of*, 136.

15 Eric Daffron, Maria Gil Ulldemolins, Becky McLaughlin, and Kris Pint, “Autotheory and Its Others: Call for Papers,” *ArtHist.net*, <https://arthist.net/archive/38297>.

* * *

Responding to the plea of Brooke-Rose that “what is needed is the present tense, but without the first person,”¹⁶ the researcher adopts the constraint used in *Remake* of writing in the third person without personal pronouns or possessive adjectives and in the present tense.

In adopting this constraint, the researcher aims to explore in what ways Brooke-Rose unlearned conventional ways of telling and theorizing stories in order to narrate a life history.¹⁷

At the same time, interested in unlearning academic conventions to acknowledge and explore the subjective nature of the act of research (in stark contrast perhaps to the desire expressed by Brooke-Rose to “drop subjectivity” but retain “immediacy and distance” through the adoption of this literary constraint),¹⁸ the researcher experiments with this writing method to attempt to detail the subjective thoughts, emotions, and projections of the researcher.

* * *

16 Brooke-Rose, *Life, End of*, 67.

17 One more or less constant stylistic feature throughout Brooke-Rose’s oeuvre is the use of specific constraints. Most of her fiction thus obeys certain rules of exclusion or self-imposed grammatical limitation, most evident in *Between*, in which she uses the lipogrammatic constraint of avoiding the verb “to be” (published, as Brooke-Rose has been keen to point out, a year before the much more famous lipogrammatic novel *La disparition* by OuLiPo author Georges Perec), and in *Next*, which avoids the verb “to have” throughout. See Hannah Van Hove, “Christine Brooke-Rose,” in *Online Encyclopedia of Literary Neo-Avant-Gardes*, <https://www.oeln.net/christine-brooke-rose>.

18 Brooke-Rose, *Life, End of*, 67.

To unlearn: “To forget or relinquish knowledge of (something previously learned); esp. to put (something considered undesirable) out of one’s mind; to give up or discontinue (a habit or practice).”¹⁹

Example No. 1: To unlearn the conventions of classic realist storytelling.

Brooke-Rose, in “Self-confrontation and the Writer,” writes that “in order to transgress one needs to know the rules, the boundaries. Knowledge again. (Which belongs to others.)”²⁰

Example No. 2: To unlearn certain systematic studies of sign processes and meaning making.

Brooke-Rose, in her chapter “Woman as Semiotic Object,” writes that “I cannot help wondering whether semiotics is not a peculiarly reactionary discipline, and semioticians unconsciously nostalgic for nice, deep, ancient, phallocratic, elementary structures of significance.”²¹

Brooke-Rose learns and unlearns, learns in order to unlearn, unlearns in order to learn.

* * *

Sidenote: In a talk given at a university, the researcher raises the following question: “Often taught to keep our supposedly objective distance, to efface the ‘I’ from our academic articles and writing, what happens when we unlearn these conventions and acknowledge the subjective nature of the act of research, the body in

19 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “to unlearn,” https://www.oed.com/dictionary/unlearn_v?tab=meaning_and_use.

20 Christine Brooke-Rose, “Self-Confrontation and the Writer,” *New Literary History* 9, no. 1 (1977): 134.

21 Brooke-Rose, *Stories, Theories and Things* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 249.

the archive?"²² In answer, a visiting professor points out that he has never thought of research as objective, and the researcher wonders about rephrasing the question posed, wonders whether the way in which it was put perhaps displayed a particular naïveté (which, the researcher reflects, was certainly true of a younger scholarly self and in a rephrasing perhaps there could be a subsequent awareness of this).

* * *

One of the ways in which Brooke-Rose's writing practice evidences an unlearning is through the questioning of categories throughout her oeuvre. Her work consistently resists straightforward classification; indeed, as she argues in "Illiterations," in which she discusses the position of the experimental woman writer, rather than "fluttering around a canon," "the best way" for any author "is to slip through all the labels, including that of 'woman writer.'"²³ Referring to what this chapter calls Brooke-Rose's "auto-...practices" is to acknowledge that her work illustrates a blurring of the distinctions of autofiction and autotheory, of fiction and theory *tout court*.²⁴ "Much criti-

22 Hannah Van Hove, "Reflections on Late-Life Creativity in Christine Brooke-Rose's *Life, End of*," paper presented at the Tempus Fugit: Lateness as Creative Process in Literature and Arts Symposium, University of Maastricht, November 2023.

23 Christine Brooke-Rose, "Illiterations," in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, ed. Ellen J. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton University Press, 1989), 67.

24 I take inspiration here from the 2019 conference AUTO- held at the Royal College of Art, London, organized by Emily LaBarge and the RCA writing faculty: Brian Dillon, Jeremy Millar, and Sally O'Reilly. As this chapter goes on to argue, in Brooke-Rose's work, the distinction between theory and fiction more generally, and also between autotheory and autofiction in particular, is one that is shown to be not particularly productive to uphold. By using the term *auto-...practices*, this chapter reflects the idea that the

cal writing is yet another interpretation, in other words another fiction grafted on the original,” she has stated.²⁵ For Brooke-Rose, the difference in epistemological status between theory and fiction is negligible.

Indeed, in the preface to *Stories, Theories and Things*, Brooke-Rose states she believes literary theory and creativity “are deeply connected.” As she describes it, the book is “about how the critic and teacher reads also as writer and how the novelist writes also as theorist, aware of a fundamental inseparability of elements that critics and teachers have to separate [...] for the purpose of this or that type of analysis, though some try to refound them into large universal systems which the novelist knows can only hold in a precarious suspension of disbelief.”²⁶ Thus, the first section heading of Brooke-Rose’s book, “Theories as Stories,” makes clear, as Arianna Zwartjes reflects in her essay “Under the Skin: An Exploration of Autotheory,” that we might “think of theory as another kind of a story: a narrative that makes sense of things.”²⁷

Later on in the collection of essays, Brooke-Rose writes, “I first have to produce a text, as author, and then, as its first reader, I interpret it, in other words rewrite it. That is where theory should in theory come in, but that is also when it really becomes ‘story.’”²⁸

Both theory and fiction have creating functions; both function in the service of “story.”

* * *

autotheoretical and autofictional are often intertwined and that the distinction between both is ultimately negligible.

25 Christine Brooke-Rose, “Remaking,” *PN Review* 23, no. 3 (1997): 65.

26 Brooke-Rose, *Stories, Theories and Things*, ix.

27 Arienne Zwartjes, “Under the Skin: An Exploration of Autotheory,” *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019): 5, <https://www.essayjournal.com/arianne-zwartjes8203-under-the-skin-an-exploration-of-autotheory-61.html>.

28 Brooke-Rose, *Stories, Theories and Things*, 15.

The researcher and the partner go for a walk around Schaerbeek in Brussels. The researcher has made a map of the places where Brooke-Rose used to live, of the route the author and sister would have followed to walk to school. This would have been the late 1920s and early 1930s. The researcher is not sure what exactly the point of this trip is, though there is, of course, a vague hope that it might shed light on an aspect of Brooke-Rose not considered by the researcher before. The researcher is attempting to piece a life together by following in footsteps taken almost a hundred years ago. Yet, just like the archival research undertaken in the papers of the author, these experiences always underline just how much there is that can't ever be known, can't ever be accessed, even as one makes little discoveries. The researcher is not overcome by feelings, generally remains very much in the present, looks at the buildings on the route, and tries, without much success, to imagine what they might have looked like in previous years.

* * *

"Biography is always fiction," writes Brooke-Rose in "Self-Confrontation and the Writer," thereby making a "fog" blur the clarity of "biography."²⁹

* * *

In *Life, End of*, Brooke-Rose's unlearning of the bodily gestures of a lifetime is, evidently, to learn new physical gestures. Throughout the novel, this learning to live as an elderly, disabled person goes hand in hand with a re-

29 Brooke-Rose, "Self-Confrontation and the Writer," 130.

flection on a lifetime dedicated to experimental writing. Thus, discussing a conversation with a former friend, she reflects that she gave the person too many details regarding her daily physical suffering:

Still learning, after five years disabled.... But learning what? First, that she can't quite conceal the long-recognised but knife-twist fact that being out of things is like no longer existing; and second, she's not interested in real answers to polite questions about coping, with what, or how, in other words, nobody is interested in efforts. Only in results. Just as nobody is interested in Form, only Content. Not the how but the what.³⁰

Yet, she writes in *Invisible Author*, “I don't know how it came about, but as far back as I can remember I have always been passionately interested in form,”³¹ explaining how she has always put the *how* first and how the *how*, the form, inevitably shapes the *what*, the content.

* * *

The researcher and the partner start at Avenue Mahillon 34, where Brooke-Rose lived together with the family at the age of four. The researcher is not sure exactly how long Brooke-Rose lived there, but it was quite brief, before the family moved to London. Then, in 1929, when the parents separated, Brooke-Rose, mother, and sister moved in with the maternal grandparents in Brussels at the large fourth-floor flat at 55 Avenue Opale.

The researcher and the partner walk toward the Avenue Opale, passing a small doll lying face

³⁰ Brooke-Rose, *Life, End of*, 18.

³¹ Brooke-Rose, *Invisible Author*, 7.

down on the pavement, wearing a blue tunic with white dots. The building Brooke-Rose used to live in looks surprisingly new, jutting out from the other houses. The small acacias described in *Remake* are bigger now. As Brooke-Rose commented on, the houses in this street are all a mishmash of styles, but this is the rule rather than the exception here in Brussels.

(Sidenote: The researcher does not enjoy the adoption of Brooke-Rose's constraint. It turns out that not using personal pronouns or possessive adjectives in these particular passages is extremely hard. Moreover, writing in this way feels unnatural and like it is doing the opposite of what it is the researcher is interested in.

Nevertheless, the constraint continues to be adopted, an experiment undertaken in the hope of getting closer to an understanding of the author.)

* * *

For Brooke-Rose, the realm of literary theory is not confined to the study of text. Because she recognizes that theory, like fiction, partakes in the creation of the world around us, both her (auto)fictional and theoretical works illustrate that the stakes of engaging with literary theory are high.³² She continually questions the suppositions a lot

32 One might argue that this belief in (literary) theory is very much in accord with French literary theory of the postwar era. Brooke-Rose states in a piece written for *The Spectator* in which she gives an overview of the different factions within French theory: "In the early sixties, the review *Tel Quel* was founded by Philippe Sollers and Julia Kristeva, opening its pages to Barthes, Todorov, Genette, Derrida, Faye, and of course to many poets and novelists from the *nouveau roman* (the 'new novel') onwards (Barthes having rather oddly annexed the *nouveau roman* to Structuralism, with which it had nothing to do). All this, as always in France, was highly politicized, language being analyzed in Marxist terms of exchange and

of this work (un)consciously relies on. Referring to work by A.J. Greimas and Claude Levi-Strauss in *Stories, Theories and Things*, Brooke-Rose, identifies, for example, “a certain relish” in descriptions that posit women as value-objects within societal systems, pointing out how such systems “had to depend for aeons on women’s silence, on the repression of their signified into the unconscious.”³³

Let’s,

the researcher proposes, take a moment to consider the engagement with literary theory in *Thru*, a novel that also plays with autofictional and autotheoretical strategies, and let’s think about it in relation to some later British campus novels such as David Lodge’s “Campus Trilogy” and Malcolm Bradbury’s *Rates of Exchange* (1983), which equally ludically engage with poststructuralist theory. Both Lodge and Bradbury, like Brooke-Rose, employ satirical means in order to render the jargon of literary theory comical. However, the references to theory in Lodge’s and Bradbury’s novels serve primarily as entertainment. As the researcher has argued elsewhere, theory remains at a distance in these novels, as something separate from and unable to influence the conception of reality in the fictional world.³⁴ In *Thru*, however, as Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan has pointed out, “the reader’s (or critic’s) metalanguage” is used “as its own object-language,” thereby subverting the distinction

subversion, so that Sollers could tell me recently, with absolute conviction, that ‘nous avons fait la révolution.’” Christine Brooke-Rose, “Ganging Up,” *The Spectator*, March 27, 1976, <http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/27th-march-1976/26/ganging-up>.

33 Brooke-Rose, *Stories, Theories and Things*, 240–41.

34 Hannah Van Hove, “Refusing the Form of ‘A Classical Campus Novel’: Experiment, Revolution and Gender in Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Thru*,” in *Campus Fictions: Literary and Intermedial Constructions of the University World*, ed. Janna Aerts, Inge Arteel, and Janine Hauthal (Academia Press, 2021), 125.

between theory and the novel.³⁵ This strategy also confers more power to theory, drawing out the implications of it on conceptions of reality; for example, according to the possibility of influencing the world it attempts to understand. Highlighting the biases present in entire systems of thought, ones that have a consequence on how we interpret the world around us, *Thru* suggests that if theoretical analysis is to continue to be useful, it needs to be reinvented, “continually, rehandling the signifiers in constant reinvestment.”³⁶

* * *

The researcher and the partner continue down to the Place Jamblinne de Meux, which is much larger than the paragraph the researcher had typed out on the phone and keeps referring to would suggest. Toward the end of the square, there is now a big public artwork, a copper construction that is oddly elegant in its enormity. The Place des Gueux is the next landmark, where the yellow trams used to stop and turn, but there are no longer tramlines here. On a building that now houses a tapas and wine bar, the partner spots an old sign that can just be made out: Café du Terminus. Then on down the Rue des Confédérés, which today too is a bit dreary, but most of the streets are dreary today in the drizzly rain.

Later, on reading that last sentence, the partner laughingly calls the researcher a liar: “It wasn’t raining then!” The researcher had already misremembered, projected feelings from the description of the “dreary” street Brooke-Rose re-

35 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *A Glance beyond Doubt: Narration, Representation, Subjectivity* (Ohio State University Press, 1996), 76.

36 Brooke-Rose, *Thru*, 631.

counted onto own experience. Yet that was not it; that was not it at all.

* * *

Writing in 1988, Brooke-Rose sums up much of her career thus far:

By now, I do know what I am doing: I deal in discourses, in the discourses of the world, political, technological, scientific, psychoanalytical, philosophical, ideological, social, emotional, and all the rest, so that knowledge to me is not an extraneous element I can put in or withhold at will, it is discourse, it is language.... I deal in discourses, as received and perceived by this or that consciousness.... Discourse comes from Latin *discurrere*, to run here and there. It has today become whole sets of rigid uses, and I am trying to make it run here and there again.³⁷

I have argued elsewhere that Brooke-Rose's emphasis on the etymological origin of the word "discourse" highlights its inherent state of flux and her equivalence of it with "knowledge."³⁸ It also illustrates, Julia Jordan has pointed out, a resistance to making a "distinction between form and content" where knowledge is a thing that can be "put in" or withheld from her writing.³⁹ For Brooke-Rose, language, and hence both (auto)fictional and theoretical writing, is inherently tied up with knowledge and does not exist separately from it.

37 Christine Brooke-Rose, "Ill Wit and Good Humour: Women's Comedy and the Canon," in *Comparative Criticism*, vol. 10: *Comedy, Irony, Parody*, ed. E.S. Shaffer (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 129.

38 Van Hove, "Christine Brooke-Rose."

39 Julia Jordan, "Indeterminate Brooke-Rose," *Textual Practice* 32, no. 2 (2017): 266.

* * *

The researcher and the partner come to the Boulevard Clovis and the school Brooke-Rose used to attend, which is still a school today. There is a big building opposite that sports the words CITE INTERNATIONALE DES WAGONS LITS ET DES GRANDS EXPRESS EUROPEENS. The researcher later Google-translates the phrase, understanding the individual words but remaining puzzled by them. Google renders it as “INTERNATIONAL CITY OF EUROPEAN BEDS AND LARGE EXPRESS WAYS.” Not quite it.

* * *

Brooke-Rose, on finding the constraints needed for writing in an autobiographical mode in what was to become *Remake*, writes, “I could now have fun with it.”⁴⁰ She elaborates, “I don’t mean that I could turn it into fiction and invent, but that my ready-made material could be transmuted into an autobiographical novel rather than an autobiography.”⁴¹

(Sidenote: The researcher is still not having fun with it.)

Brooke-Rose reflects further:

My exercise in remembrance [the I-did-this-I-did-that narrative she started out with], in other words, had produced no being I could recognize, although all the memories were “real,” whereas *Remake* produced someone or other I felt

⁴⁰ Brooke-Rose, *Invisible Author*, 60.

⁴¹ Ibid.

happy with. Identity, in other words, is a fiction, made of language.⁴²

The distancing this technique engenders feels, for the researcher, like it is producing an unrecognizable being, someone the researcher is uneasy with. It is transforming the researcher into a character (or making this transformation more explicit — perhaps after all, as Brooke-Rose is pointing out, one is always a character produced in text, despite what person one writes in?), and the researcher feels uncomfortable in this position. The researcher wants recourse to the “I.”

* * *

The researcher looks through notes taken when consulting the Christine Brooke-Rose papers at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas. Apparently, an episode of the *Bookmark* TV program featuring Brooke-Rose was viewed while there, but the researcher does not remember watching it.

The researcher reads, from the notes, that “the programme ends with the reading out of a memo by CBR”:

All our discourses, including those that claim to tell the world as it is, are themselves as fictional as our fiction.

This film, for instance:

(1) You didn’t like the classroom where I actually teach because it’s shabby and sinister. So, since the students weren’t there anyway, I took you to a nice bright class-

42 Ibid.

room where we held our meetings and we pretended it was my classroom.

(2) You wanted a cliché shot of me coming out of the lift, whereas I always used the stairs.

(3) And we both enjoyed playing up the image of the Romantic exile, with me walking along the Seine in a long cape, and a wide hat I'd never wear just there, in case it blew away into the river. I'm not a Romantic exile, times have changed. I'm merely a writer, who happens to have a job in Europe.⁴³

After reading the notes, the researcher seems to remember seeing the shot of Brooke-Rose along the Seine the notes describe. "Is that a remake? Or a self-confrontation?"⁴⁴

* * *

Zwartjes has suggested that if we think of theory as "another kind of story," we might think of it "more broadly, as ways of defining & explaining our experience to ourselves — but also, perhaps, generalizing our experience as a potentially-shared (though not universal) phenomenon: turning it into a category, something that can be articulated and defined."⁴⁵ Zwartjes continues, "Historically this articulation has been couched in bodiless and emotion-

43 Christine Brooke-Rose and Ian Hamilton, *Bookmark*, "Programme 16: The Yorkshire Ripper, Melvyn Bragg, Christine Brooke-Rose," BBC 2, London, filmed 1986 (aired May 7, 1987), accessed through the Christine Brooke-Rose Papers at the Harry Ransom Center archive, University of Texas, Austin.

44 Brooke-Rose, *Remake*, 3. Brooke-Rose asks this question upon writing down a particular memory (of being bundled into a black cab as a four-year-old with her sister), wondering whether she really remembers this occurring or whether the memory is a fictional fabrication.

45 Zwartjes, "Under the Skin," 5.

less 'objective' voice, and one of the powers of autotheory is to move beyond that pretense of objectivity."⁴⁶

To the researcher, this seems at first glance at odds with Brooke-Rose's injunction to "drop subjectivity but retain immediacy and distance."⁴⁷

Zwartjes then quotes Rachel Blau DuPlessis, who notes that the opposite of such objectivity that "theorizes without pragmatic connection to materiality or to empirical knowledge" is "not subjective but implicated [...] and intersubjective."⁴⁸

The researcher wonders whether Brooke-Rose, too, is suggesting a move beyond the objectivity/subjectivity binary.

Indeed,

there is a curious opposition in Brooke-Rose's work that centers around voice and the question of who is speaking. As I made clear earlier, she advocates using the third person instead of the first person, writing in the present tense rather than the narrative past tense, adopting what she terms "the rare impersonal present tense of our literary criticism," one that "ultimately derives from science."⁴⁹ Karen Lawrence has suggested that this technique is Brooke-Rose's "most significant and consistent lipogram" invented in and employed throughout her fiction, and she describes it as follows: "a narratorless narrative that eschews the past tense and first-person. With no introspection (hence, no one vantage point for looking back) and

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Brooke-Rose, *Life, End of*, 67.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Zwartjes, "Under the Skin," 5.

⁴⁹ Brooke-Rose, *Life, End of*, 67.

no origin or voice speaking the text, she constantly raises the question "Who speaks?"⁵⁰

The question of "Who speaks?" is asked throughout *Thru*⁵¹ and similarly returned to at various points in *Life, End of*:

Who speaks?

Ah, the twentieth century question. In fact, since you ask, nobody speaks.

Don't be silly.⁵²

Whereas *Remake* is categorical in its adoption of its chosen constraint,⁵³ *Life, End of* allows for slippages in its narrative voice. Most of the time, the character is referred to in the third person, and yet here and there the "I" or the "we" makes a rare appearance. These slippages undo the distinction between character and author that the novel, most of the time, attempts to retain. In a sense, this work, which reflects on writing experiments undertaken while giving the reader a glimpse into a daily life constrained by a failing physicality, echoes the unraveling of both the body and mind to which the novel alludes. Thus, for example, after a fall, the text states, "The author collapses, into the character again, scattering the reader."⁵⁴ At a dif-

50 Karen Lawrence, *Techniques for Living: Fiction and Theory in the Work of Christine Brooke-Rose* (Ohio State University Press, 2010), 20.

51 Brooke-Rose, *Thru*, 579, 600, 613, 620, 637, 667, 685.

52 Brooke-Rose, *Life, End of*, 64.

53 Only *Remake*'s chapter 3 does not obey the self-imposed constraint of narrating in the third person in the present tense without personal pronouns or adjectives. "The whole of Chapter 3, which [...] tells of my mother's death in 1984, at the age of 92, is based on a diary I kept at the time, and diaries, as I clearly observe in the text, overuse pronouns," Brooke-Rose explains in *Invisible Author*. "So I implicitly (or almost explicitly) break my own rule, partly because I'm using a real document, partly to point up the contrast, when strong personal emotion is at stake" (61).

54 Brooke-Rose, *Life, End of*, 103.

ferent point, the text asks, “Who speaks? The Author? The Character?” before proffering the following answer:

Not the Author, who has had to withdraw for a while and let the Character take over. For this is a reconstruction, clearly, of a discussion that in fact continues in bits over forty-eight hours, split, interrupted, digressed, upped and downed. And of a time that’s over, with walking, cooking, receiving, still the norm. People don’t talk like that, it’s against all the elementary rules of novel or scenario, even of autobio. But this isn’t a scenario. Or a novel. Or an autobio. It’s a dying diary, undated except indirectly because the sense of time is lost. And the conversation exists, somewhere in the memory, as the author exists even pronounced dead. What gets lost is precisely the forkings, the omissions, the digressions, the interruptions, the ups and downs and ins and outs of real talk. Perhaps it’s really or also Life, End of: The Novel.⁵⁵

In both quotes, Brooke-Rose appears to be correlating absolute truth (the notion of “what really happened”) with the Author, whereas employing “the Character” allows for representation, for getting close to truth without entering the domain of absolute representation (which is hardly possible anyway, Brooke-Rose’s oeuvre suggests).

* * *

The researcher reflects, yet again, what a slippery business it is to determine the relationship between autotheory and autofiction, between theory and fiction. To do so is to circle around fundamental questions about writing, about the employment of language, about meaning. It is

55 Ibid., 86–87.

an attempt — yet again — to get as close as possible to the “it” of Eliot’s “That is not it, at all” or Brooke-Rose’s “That is not it at all.”

These questions Brooke-Rose faced head-on, as a teacher, as a critic, as a writer. For example, Brooke-Rose asks the following in a chapter titled “Whatever Happened to Narratology?”:

Discourse, texts of all kinds, purport to represent the real, but what does this mean? Is the representation in excess of the real (Aristotle), or less than the real (Plato), or does it merely reorganize the real? These are ancient questions, but we are still asking them, not just of representations (stories) in general, but also of the very discourses (stories) that purport to analyze stories, stories of people, stories of people reading stories of people, stories of people reading stories of the world.⁵⁶

* * *

The continual raising of the question of who is speaking points to an unwillingness on Brooke-Rose’s part to pinpoint or fix identity. In an interview with Lorna Sage, she explains:

“I exist” shouldn’t mean “I’m seeking an identity,” or “an ego-massage,” but “I am content to be.” I just am; I’m a cell, a fish, a human being. It’s the individual being we must respect, life, all that someone is, not necessarily the identity construct. It’s a good analogy with what I’ve always said about form and content. We can and do talk of content (as we do of identity) wrenched from form and so remain with summary and slogan, but if we can bring a being/a work alive for what it is, simultaneously trying to understand how it functions,

56 Brooke-Rose, *Theories, Stories and Things*, 16.

we automatically get at the content and a good deal more besides.⁵⁷

Brooke-Rose here makes clear that she interprets identity, or “the identity construct,” as narrowing down the possibility and plurality of selves by which one is constituted. Her fiction and her theory consistently suggest one is made up of a plurality of voices. “Self-confrontation is like breathing, every breath is another self,” she writes in “Self-Confrontation and the Writer.”⁵⁸ When Sage asks whether we might think of her thoughts on identity as constituting “a certain feminism, which is about wanting to deconstruct notions of identity, not constructing them,” Brooke-Rose responds, “Deconstruct doesn’t mean destroy, but quietly show how it functions.”⁵⁹

The discomfort the researcher experiences when writing by adopting the constraint employed by Brooke-Rose centers around notions of authenticity. Wanting recourse to the “I” is wanting recourse to an authentic voice, one that does not feel too self-conscious, too performed, which is what the researcher feels is happening in the sections written in the third person when referring to “the researcher.” Brooke-Rose is pointing out the inevitable, inherent performativity and inauthenticity of the identity construct. The researcher finds it hard to let go of the notion of the authentic self.

* * *

57 Brooke-Rose, *Invisible Author*, 176.

58 Brooke-Rose, “Self-Confrontation and the Writer,” 136.

59 Brooke-Rose, *Invisible Author*, 177.

Brooke-Rose's oeuvre as a whole displays and problematizes the idea of identity as constituting a singular self or voice. Indeed, when reflecting on the constraint employed in *Between*, the use of the lipogram "to be," Brooke-Rose writes the following:

I must have been feeling for both contemporary and later deconstructions of the notion of identity as a male humanist concept, a deconstruction already incoherently incipient in Virginia Woolf. A book does more than it knows.⁶⁰

The researcher is reading through Brooke-Rose's correspondence of the early to mid-2000s, written during the same time as Brooke-Rose is writing *Life, End of*. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, friend of Brooke-Rose and literary theorist, has sent Brooke-Rose a copy of "The Story of 'I': Illness and Narrative Identity," an article that has just been released. A handwritten note at the top of the article, dated 2nd of March 2002, grabs the attention of the researcher:

Dear Christine,
From one ill person to another
From one friend to another
Much love, Shlomith⁶¹

In this article, Rimmon-Kenan explores "the interplay in illness narratives between continuity, its disruption, and the various ways of coping

60 Ibid., 113–14. She continues, "On authorial identity, I remember writing an article called 'The Death of the Author' for the *Observer* in 1961, some seven years before Barthes' essay of the same name" (114).

61 Christine Brooke-Rose Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, Gift, 2002 (G12167) Box 2.

with the latter.”⁶² After reading it, Brooke-Rose responds to Rimmon-Kenan:

But what is extraordinary about this article is that it has confirmed my disbelief in identity as a sort of eternal entity. The fact that it can so change through disability, at any age, would seem to support that, but nobody accepts it easily. I have come to accept it because the last few years have been a revelation to me, of just such change.⁶³

Reading over this correspondence makes the researcher think also of the last letters between Brooke-Rose and Muriel Spark and of the intimacy shared in writing to the other about various bodily infirmities experienced. The researcher comes across these letters for the first time in the spring of 2018 when doing some research in the Muriel Spark papers in Edinburgh. In the summer of 2019, the researcher pieces the late-life correspondence together further when consulting the Brooke-Rose papers at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin.

The letters between Spark and Brooke-Rose of this time mainly talk of ailments, of the daily struggles of everyday living when faced with the fact that walking and seeing are becoming more and more difficult. On October 12, 2005, Brooke-Rose exclaims in a letter to Spark, “It seems to my astonishment, that we’ve ended up in a race for ailments!”⁶⁴ Brooke-Rose concludes the let-

62 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, “The Story of ‘I’: Illness and Narrative Identity,” *NARRATIVE* 10, no. 1 (2002): 10.

63 Email from Christine Brooke-Rose to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, March 25, 2002, Christine Brooke-Rose Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, Gift, 2002 (G12167), Box 2.

64 Letter from Christine Brooke-Rose to Muriel Spark, October 12, 2005, Muriel Spark Papers, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.

ter, "I was very touched to read of your physical situation, it's so rare to find someone willing to listen to handicaps."⁶⁵ Despite failing eyesight, despite the fact it is getting physically harder and harder to write to each other, Brooke-Rose and Spark keep doing so as long as is possible.

The researcher is moved by the letters. At the same time, the researcher feels voyeuristic reading these intimate reflections, knowing about the lapsed friendship between both authors, witnessing it flutter back to life again in 2004, when both women are in the last stages of life.

* * *

Four years after the publication of her *NARRATIVE* article, which left such a lasting impression on Brooke-Rose, Rimmon-Kenan publishes an article that grows out of her original concerns regarding illness narratives and narrative identity. Titled "What Can Narrative Theory Learn from Illness Narratives?," this subsequent article's starting point is Rimmon-Kenan's increasing awareness that "just as narrative theory can elucidate illness narratives, so can illness narratives illuminate, and sometimes problematize, central notions in narratology and narrative theory."⁶⁶ One of the texts included in the article's discussion is Brooke-Rose's *Life, End of*, and Rimmon-Kenan suggests that the novel "blurs the border between direct and fictionalized autobiography" and that its "emphasis on the destructive effect of illness on the sufferer's sense of time" encourages the rethinking of the relations "between time and space in certain types of narrative."⁶⁷

65 Letter from Brooke-Rose to Spark, October 12, 2005.

66 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, "What Can Narrative Theory Learn from Illness Narratives?," *Literature and Medicine* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 241.

67 *Ibid.*, 250–51.

Rimmon-Kenan's article is instructive in its exposition, but it also highlights an aspect of Brooke-Rose's work this chapter has been gesturing toward: that the relationship between narrative (whether fictional, autotheoretical, or autofictional) and theory is a symbiotic relationship. This chapter thus suggests that it is not only Brooke-Rose's last work, classed as an "illness narrative" by Rimmon-Kenan, but also her narrative work in general that makes this claim. Theory and fiction do not stand apart from each other; they interact and inform the other always. And life is entangled with both fiction and theory. As critics we try and disentangle them; we try to make statements about one or the other as if they are not interconnected. But as Brooke-Rose knows, and shows us throughout her writing, this distinction "can only hold in a precarious suspension of disbelief."⁶⁸

* * *

The researcher is on a family holiday in the South of France. The place where the researcher and family are staying is only a thirty-minute drive from the place Christine Brooke-Rose ended the days: Cabrières d'Avignon.

The researcher and family drive to the village, following Brooke-Rose's instructions (found when looking through the uncatalogued accessions in the Brooke-Rose Papers, written to an acquaintance of the author in anticipation of a visit). Once the researcher and family arrive, the car is parked, and they take a walk into the village, further following the instructions:

Drive on into the village, past the church on your right,
then grocer on right and butcher on left, to T-bend

68 Brooke-Rose, *Stories, Theories and Things*, ix.

with small fountain in front of a house with lilac-blue shutters (ugh).⁶⁹

The grocer and butcher are still there, and the shutters are still blue, and the researcher and family agree they look quite nice.

TURN LEFT (Rue du Château), then immediate RIGHT (i.e., not to château), up a winding road that becomes Rue Haute.... The house is called LOU JAS, large on the wood. Get at right angles and close up, ring the bell, and as soon as gates open, drive in, and into my now empty garage.⁷⁰

The researcher and family arrive at the author's old house, which looks deserted. On the white letterbox, the letters "ROSE" are made out. The researcher peers through the gates and through the window. The father suggests asking the neighbors if they knew Brooke-Rose, but the researcher is hesitant, shy. But then the father is off talking to someone who suggests knocking on the door of an elderly neighbor. The researcher goes along too, and the woman the father first spoke to knocks on a door and shouts the name of the neighbor. The woman goes inside and, after a little bit, comes out with the elderly neighbor. They all stand on the porch, and the researcher explains the motive for coming here, that the researcher is researching the life and work of Brooke-Rose. The elderly neighbor says Brooke-Rose used to go for little walks, that sometimes

69 Email from Graeme [unknown] to Christine Brooke-Rose, March 13, 2002, Christine Brooke-Rose Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, Gift, 2002 (G12167), Box 2.

70 Email from Graeme [unknown] to Christine Brooke-Rose, March 13, 2002.

the neighbor and author would sit on the bench round the corner together, that Brooke-Rose was English, had written books, though not the type of books that appealed to the neighbor (quite difficult ones), that one day the ambulance came and took Brooke-Rose away and the author never returned. Someone wanted to buy the house at one point, but for some reason it didn't work out, and the house is still empty. The researcher and the father thank the neighbor very much for the sharing of memories and wander back down, joining the others outside the deserted house.

The researcher and the family walk to the main part of the village and buy some cans of soft drink from the grocers, and the researcher buys two postcards that depict the village, two old photographs that are promptly lost.

* * *

In *Life, End of*, Brooke-Rose writes of losing the first five sections of her text, which she's writing in great physical discomfort, erased by two careless clicks. She asks herself whether she should give up:

So it could be left, lost. But it's like that euthanasia story. Whatever the bit of life has become, it is clung to. Or is itself doing the clinging. This bit of life is made a bit more of life by writing.⁷¹

And so Brooke-Rose restarts her book in the hot August of 2003 or 2004, with pains tearing at her chest as she sits in the only position from which she is able to write. She is confined to the two rooms on the ground floor of her

71 Brooke-Rose, *Life, End of*, 76.

home in the village of Cabrières d'Avignon in the South of France. She is unable to get upstairs or out to her balcony.

The researcher tries to imagine what Brooke-Rose's view might be like.

(This image here, though shot in France, is not it.)



Fig. 7.2. French landscape. Photo by the author.

Bibliography

- Brooke-Rose, Christine. "Ganging Up." *The Spectator*, March 27, 1976. <http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/27th-march-1976/26/ganging-up>.
- . "Illiterations." In *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, edited by Ellen J. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs. Princeton University Press, 1989.
- . "Ill Wit and Good Humour: Women's Comedy and the Canon." In *Comparative Criticism*. Vol. 10: *Comedy, Irony, Parody*, edited by E.S. Shaffer. Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- . *Invisible Author*. Ohio University Press, 2002.
- . *Life, End of*. Carcanet, 2006.
- . *Remake*. Carcanet, 1996.
- . "Remaking." *PN Review* 23, no. 3 (1997): 65–68. <https://www.pnreview.co.uk/archive/remaking/909>.
- . "Self-Confrontation and the Writer." *New Literary History* 9, no. 1 (1977): 129–36. DOI: 10.2307/468441.
- . *Stories, Theories and Things*. Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- . *Thru*. In *The Christine Brooke-Rose Omnibus: Four Novels*. Carcanet, 1986.
- Brooke-Rose, Christine, and Graeme [unknown]. Email from Graeme [unknown] to Christine Brooke-Rose. March 13, 2002. Christine Brooke-Rose Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, Gift, 2002 (G12167), Box 2.
- Brooke-Rose, Christine, and Ian Hamilton. Bookmark. "Programme 16: The Yorkshire Ripper, Melvyn Bragg, Christine Brooke-Rose." BBC 2, London, filmed 1986, (Aired May 7, 1987), accessed through the Christine Brooke-Rose Papers at the Harry Ransom Center archive, University of Texas, Austin.
- Brooke-Rose, Christine, and Shlomith Rimmon-Kennan. Email from Christine Brooke-Rose to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan. March 25, 2002. Christine Brooke-Rose Papers,

- Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, Gift, 2002 (G12167), Box 2.
- Brooke-Rose, Christine, and Muriel Spark. Letter from Christine Brooke-Rose to Muriel Spark. October 12, 2005. Muriel Spark Papers, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.
- Daffron, Eric, Maria Gil Ulldemolins, Becky McLaughlin, and Kris Pint. "Autotheory and Its Others: Call for Papers." *ArtHist.net*, January 12, 2023. <https://arthist.net/archive/38297>.
- Dix, Hywel. "Introduction: Autofiction in English: The Story So Far." In *Autofiction in English*, edited by Hywel Dix. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- Eliot, T.S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." *Poetry* 6, no. 3 (1915): 130–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20570428>.
- Jordan, Julia. "Indeterminate Brooke-Rose." *Textual Practice* 32, no. 2 (2018): 265–81. DOI: 10.1080/0950236X.2018.1413039.
- Lawrence, Karen. *Techniques for Living: Fiction and Theory in the Work of Christine Brooke-Rose*. Ohio State University Press, 2010.
- Martens, Lorna. "Autofiction in the Third Person, with a Reading of Christine Brooke-Rose's *Remake*." In *Autofiction in English*, edited by Hywel Dix. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *A Glance beyond Doubt: Narration, Representation, Subjectivity*. Ohio State University Press, 1996.
- . "The Story of 'T': Illness and Narrative Identity." *NARRATIVE* 10, no. 1 (2002): 9–27. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20107270>.
- . "What Can Narrative Theory Learn from Illness Narratives?" *Literature and Medicine* 25, no. 2 (2006): 241–54. DOI: 10.1353/lm.2007.0019.
- Van Hove, Hannah. "Christine Brooke-Rose." In *Online Encyclopedia of Literary Neo-Avant-Gardes*. <https://www.oeln.net/christine-brooke-rose>.
- . "Refusing the Form of 'A Classical Campus Novel': Experiment, Revolution and Gender in Christine Brooke-

Rose's *Thru*.” In *Campus Fictions: Literary and Intermedial Constructions of the University World*, edited by Janna Aerts, Inge Arteel, and Janine Hauthal. Academia Press, 2021.

Zwartjes, Arianne. “Under the Skin: An Exploration of Autotheory.” *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019): 1–18. <https://www.assayjournal.com/arianne-zwartjes8203-under-the-skin-an-exploration-of-autotheory-61.html>.

An Apprenticeship in Not-Knowing

Paige Sweet

Psychoanalysis [...] is an apprenticeship in living beyond despair.

— Julia Kristeva, “On the Melancholic Imaginary”¹

————— *I’m not ready to write this because my soul is not fully formed*

It’s only when we forget all our knowledge that we begin to know.

— Clarice Lispector, *An Apprenticeship or the Book of Pleasures*²

When I began psychoanalysis, I told my analyst, “I don’t really need therapy right now. I’m soldiering along just fine. I’m only in analysis because it’s a requirement for psychoanalytic training.”

1 Julia Kristeva, “On the Melancholic Imaginary,” in *Discourse in Psychoanalysis and Literature*, ed. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, trans. Louise Burchill (Methuen & Co., 1987), 121.

2 Clarice Lispector, *An Apprenticeship or The Book of Pleasures*, trans. Stefan Tobler (Penguin Classics, 2021), 41.

Without missing a beat, she shot back, "So what do you want, fake therapy?"

I'm not sure what I wanted. I wasn't even sure I wanted to be a psychoanalyst, a doubt that had only intensified over the first month of training. I probably still wanted to be a college professor, but after my postdoctoral fellowship ended, I had stopped looking for an academic job. Because I had enjoyed reading psychoanalytic theory in graduate school, I thought I knew what I was getting into by choosing psychoanalysis as my new career.

I didn't.

Feeling uncertain, I looked for a kindred spirit to keep me company. Books have been a constant companion in my life, so when I sensed that Clarice Lispector's novel *An Apprenticeship or the Book of Pleasures* (1969) was gazing at me from my bookcase, I reached for it, even though all I could recall was that the main character, Lóri, was a schoolteacher.

As I became reacquainted with Lóri, I found comfort in the way she also wasn't sure what she wanted, aside from a vague desire to become more of herself and, possibly, to love Ulisses, a professor of philosophy. Ulisses isn't Lóri's teacher, and his unconventional seduction tarries with uncertainty more than knowing — the whole novel, in fact, is about not knowing — but, in pseudo-bildungsroman style, it follows Lóri as she learns to be a soulful human. Only when Lóri gains "a body and a soul"³ will she and Ulisses become lovers.

With Lóri's journey in mind, I began thinking of psychoanalytic training as an apprenticeship. The dustcover on the original Portuguese version of the novel buttresses this thought: "The protagonist's experience in this apprenticeship shows affinities [...] with the trials of the beautiful Psyche, from the Greek myth."⁴ Reading this provoked a queasy feeling that, like Lóri, I would also go through trials, give up certain ways of knowing, and relinquish slivers of self so that I could gain the kind

³ Ibid., 120.

⁴ Clarice Lispector, *Uma aprendizagem ou O livro dos prazeres* (Editora Rocco, 1969) (translation mine).

of unknowing that opens to new knowledges and a new form of myself.

I wanted to reach for my analyst with the same ease and confidence with which I had reached for *An Apprenticeship*. I sensed that, like Lóri, I'd need the help of another to discover the unknown knowledge enfolded within me. Lóri eventually gains a soul not *because of* Ulisses's tutelage but in relation to it. Perhaps there was something about my soul and its relationship to another that would be crucial to my apprenticeship, too.

In retrospect, I realized that I'd been worrying about my soul for a long time, but I would not have always put it in these terms. The word "soul," after all, seems so freighted with meanings foreign to psychoanalysis. But recalling that the Greek word for "soul" is "psyche" set me off on a path to consider psychoanalysis as a modern art of refashioning the soul.

Sigmund Freud uses the word "psyche" as a word for the mind, to refer to the ways that the self is animated by forces other than those that can be accounted for by reason or biology. Psyches are dynamic formations, continuously undergoing transformation. Julia Kristeva, in *New Maladies of the Soul*, describes the psyche as "a structure of meaning" between the body and language, between self and other.⁵ "The soul, as a 'psychic apparatus,' gives rise to psychological and somatic symptoms and is modified during transference."⁶ Following her, I imagine the psyche as facilitating signals between inner and outer realities, transmuting signs and sensations—a supersonic feedback loop between souls, conveying sense and sensation more than straightforward meanings. Thinking about the psyche as a structure of meaning between self and other, between body and language, makes it impossible to think of the soul as the possession of one person. The psyche only exists because of others; similarly, the soul is quilted by others.

5 Julia Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans. Ross Mitchell Guberman (Columbia University Press, 1995), 4.

6 Ibid.

The analyst, for example. What did I know — or refuse to know — when I proclaimed to my analyst that I didn't need therapy? A moment after my ruffled silence at her "fake therapy" remark, my analyst said with a bit more stillness, "We all have stuff."

My soul twitched.

This exchange captures the paradox of what Jacques Lacan refers to as the *sujet supposé savoir*, the "subject supposed to know," which describes the relationship between the analyst and analysand. In Lacan's formulation, the analyst occupies the position of *the one supposed to know* — the place of the ostensible expert, the place of the one who can, presumably, help. To describe the analyst as a *position* emphasizes the placeholding function within this structure. Namely, it describes why the analysand believes that the analyst knows the meaning of her discourse even as these meanings remain opaque to the analysand herself. The analyst, however, understands that she is only *positioned* as the one supposed to know; she knows that she does not have the knowledge attributed to her.

Early in psychoanalytic training, I heard one of the truisms of being a good analyst: *stay curious!* Like Lacan's formulation, the exhortation suggests that as soon as you think you know what is going on with another person's psyche, you are missing something. The best way to proceed as an analyst is by occupying the place of not-knowing. Over time, the structure of the *sujet supposé savoir* facilitates the emergence of the analysand's unconscious, the scene of another knowledge.

According to Lacan, even as the analyst is essential to the process, the work of analysis — the analyzing — is performed by the one undergoing analysis, the person he names the "analysand." Psychoanalytic training requires personal analysis because it is crucial to analyze one's own psychic processes to work with another's. Only by being in analysis can one really become conversant with one's own stuff and avoid confusing it with the stuff of one's analysand. But becoming acquainted with the stuff that has been unconsciously secreted away is deeply unsettling. The only thing that unsettled me more than learning what I did

not know about myself was exposing these unknown parts to my analyst.

Looking back, I realize that I likely communicated exactly this fear when I told my analyst that I did not need analysis. My assertion also tacitly confirmed a central tenet of psychoanalysis: It is the analyst's desire that initiates analysis. Like any other analysand, I was resistant to knowing the obstacles I claimed to want to remove, whether these were blocks to my own self-awareness or to my own happiness. Bruce Fink puts it this way: "If there is a desire in therapy, that serves as its motor force, it is the analyst's, not the patient's."⁷ This desire is not the same as knowing what the analysis will entail, and yet it coaxes a soul into formation.

It's an insight that still startles me: We need someone else's desire, someone else's curiosity to ignite our own.

After fifteen years as an academic, the position of knowing was familiar to me, so it took me a while to grasp that this was not simply a different epistemology but an entirely different structure of relating. The knowledge paradigm I was accustomed to — the conventional apprenticeship that moved from ignorance to knowledge — was suddenly inverted: Now I was tasked with loosening the hold knowledge had on me to embrace not-knowing. Lacan quips that to "love is to give what one does not have to someone who does not want it."⁸ I began to think that psychoanalytic training involves an apprenticeship in not knowing from a master who is supposed to know — but doesn't.

Because my soul is still in formation, I'll try not to put words where there is not yet knowledge.

— *Psychoanalysis is one way to form a soul*

7 Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 4.

8 Jacques Lacan, "Seminar XII: Crucial Problems," trans. Cormac Gallagher, unpublished manuscript, 1964, 165.

But there's a great, the greatest obstacle for me to make progress: I myself. I've been the greatest hindrance along my path. It's with enormous effort that I manage to impose myself on myself. [...] But sometimes through a word of yours or a word I read, suddenly everything becomes clear.

— Lispector, *An Apprenticeship*⁹

A few months into analysis, some words I had read somewhere suddenly became available to me as the real reason I wanted — no, needed — analysis. I worked up the courage to tell my analyst: "I'm afraid I have the malady of death." She looked at me blankly, silently. I felt I had exposed my own missing heart, and she simply looked on impassively, waiting for me to say more.

In truth, I'm not sure how I wanted her to respond — a heartfelt "aww"? A balm for my achy soul? An acknowledgment of the clever literary reference? The brief stints I'd had in therapy before had been ... nice. They had provided some relief. They had never unsettled me, never challenged me the way analysis was beginning to. Analysis, I was quickly learning, reveled in frustrations. And one of my main frustrations came at my analyst's insistence that I put my feelings into words. I faltered. I didn't know the words. So, I returned to the rich descriptions in novels to see how characters experience their feelings. I palpated literary scenes and waited to see if they lit up any corresponding feelings in me.

In the soul's journey to love, conflicts and uncertainties inevitably abound. Only by working through these obstacles will one find an opening through which the soul can begin to sense its own yearning. Lóri experienced this, too. Like any analysand, Lóri often wants to go back to her old ways. She is tempted to start a casual relationship with Ulysses rather than wait for the "soul intimacy" that he seems to promise.¹⁰ Lóri, in her frustration, asks "the God" to help her. "Relieve my soul," she pleads, "make me feel that loving is not dying, that the surrender of

⁹ Lispector, *An Apprenticeship or The Book of Pleasures*, 42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

yourself doesn't mean death."¹¹ Lóri's idea of *the God* (*o Deus*), like Spinoza's, understands God as immanent to all things; *the God* is nature as much as it is human and divine. In pleading for a love that doesn't spell death, Lóri seeks an earthly union with the divine. This twist on the Platonic allegory of the soul's journey through life, where the soul will be united with the divine in death after enduring the suffering of life, is exemplified in the myth of Psyche.

More than one hundred versions of the Psyche myth precede Lucius Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* (second century AD), the first written account of the myth. Although many people draw on this account using Apuleius's Latin names for the gods, I use their Greek names here for consistency with Freud.¹² Regardless of their names, I imagine them all standing together among the many versions of this myth that proliferated in antiquity and among the versions that continue to proliferate to this day.

Psyche's trials begin with her extraordinary beauty. Born mortal to a king whose name is unknown, Psyche's beauty rivals that of Aphrodite (Venus), the goddess of beauty and love. Enraged at the comparison, Aphrodite orders her son Eros (Cupid), god of desire, to make Psyche fall in love with a monstrous man. But because love has a logic of its own, Eros himself falls in love with Psyche and has her transported to his palace, where they live together in secret, because marriage between a god and a mortal is forbidden. Eros warns Psyche never to look at him or else risk losing his love forever. But, spurred on by her jealous sisters, Psyche steals a peak at him one night as he sleeps. When some oil from her lamp drips on him, he awakens, furious at her betrayal, and flees. Despondent, Psyche sets off in search of him, eventually begging Aphrodite to help her. Aphrodite revels in subjecting Psyche to a series of impossible trials, ostensibly with the promise that forgiveness and reconciliation are forthcoming. Various creatures and spirits come to Psyche's aid to

¹¹ Ibid., 44.

¹² Psyche's name is unchanged in Latin; all other Latin names are indicated in parentheses.

complete the impossible tasks. But she falls for Aphrodite's trap in the last instance, opening a bottle of Persephone's (Proserpina's) beauty cream to use on herself — just as Aphrodite had predicted. Instead of cream, the vial contains a deathly sleep that immediately overtakes Psyche. Eros gently wakes her, putting the sleep back in the vial. He then begs the gods to make their marriage legitimate and grant Psyche immortality.

In the modern mythology of psychoanalysis, the analyst can be likened to the role of Eros. The analysand suffers because of love, but she is also transformed by it. "Transformed" may be another word for cure. When Freud, in a letter to Carl Jung, says that "psychoanalysis in essence is a cure through love," he is talking about how transference frequently leads analysands to fall in love with their analysts, a love the analyst must refuse.¹³ Transference — the analysand's tendency to copy earlier (usually filial) feelings onto the analyst — is inevitably part of the cure. The emotional muddle that occurs in analysis is one reason that so many people choose their analysts carefully, conducting interviews to determine to whom they can entrust their soul.

I was lazy in choosing an analyst. I had been considering psychoanalytic training for several years, but I went about the process in a haphazard way. After flirting with a few nonacademic jobs, I'd accepted a position I knew I would hate: working as an assistant to a rich woman on the Upper East Side. Masochistically, I had decided that work I found humiliating would prevent me from settling into some middling job that rented my brain and left me depleted.

Slapdash research, hasty application: I was accepted to a psychoanalytic training program by the third month of my loathsome job. I resolved to figure out as I went along how I would manage a week that would consist of three hours of psychoanalytic coursework, three hours of personal psychoanalysis, an

13 Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, *The Freud/Jung Letters: The Correspondence between Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung*, ed. William McGuire, trans. R.F.C. Hull and Ralph Manheim, abridged paperback ed. (Princeton University Press, 1994), 13.

hour of clinical supervision, some to-be-determined number of hours at the clinic seeing my own patients, commutes of various lengths to destinations throughout Manhattan, and the forty-five hours of personal assistant work that would, at least, pay for it all.

I met my analyst during my first class, a course on Freud and transference. Her office was a five-minute walk from the home office where I was working. When I asked her to be my analyst, she asked me if I would find it overwhelming to see her in class and in analysis three times a week. I was surprised by the question. Why should it matter? My only frame of reference was graduate school, where the personal often intruded into the intellectual, where misplaced intimacies were as common as the infantilizing hierarchies. "Throw me into the deep end," I might have said to her. "I know how to hold my breath." But I simply said, "It'll be fine." I saw no need to evaluate criteria other than my ability to steal away on an unauthorized lunch hour to do analysis.

Despite my lazy process, I struck gold with my analyst. She was brilliant. Startlingly direct, unexpectedly funny, remarkably insightful — a bewildering catalyst for all the transference I needed for a cure, or for whatever you call the reformatting of my soul.

I had wanted to impress her when I spoke of having "the malady of death." She was not impressed. So, with much embarrassment for having to use graceless words, I began to elaborate on the words I'd borrowed from Marguerite Duras. "There's a double meaning," I explained. "In French, when you say it out loud, *la maladie de la mort*, you get *the malady of death*. But it also sounds like *la maladie de l'amour*, the malady of love." She might have nodded curtly. With these minimal gestures, I wasn't sure she was understanding me. I was frustrated. I wanted a real response, an acknowledgment of some kind that I was admitting I needed her help. I squirmed in discomfort.

I tend to worry that words lose their vibrant radiating power when one tries to pin them to a single meaning. I fear that saying the words out loud will make them stop pulsating, dull their

shimmering nuances to faded gray thuds. When things are put into words, the words erase — evacuate! eviscerate! — the thing they point to. And this evacuated thing holds something essential. But I dislike being misunderstood more than I dislike using inelegant words, so I blurted out, “The malady of death is the inability to love.” She continued to sit there silently.

Had I understood transference better, I might have been comforted by the strange likeness between Duras’s description of the malady of death and Freud’s unsettling take on love. In both, there is a persistent inability to love the object purely in itself. When the emphasis falls on *inability*, we might see this as one way to understand *the malady of death* — in Duras’s novella, the unnamed man cannot open himself to love the unnamed woman. (Lóri might say there is no soul intimacy for this couple.) Freud’s emphasis falls more on the unoriginality of the love object. Love, he says in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, is not the finding of a new object but the refinding of an old one.¹⁴

Unknowingly, we transfer patterns from our earliest experiences onto every love object. Janet Malcolm offers this synthesis: “We cannot see each other plain. A horrible kind of predestination hovers over each new attachment we form.”¹⁵ I’m not convinced that it’s *horrible*, but it is a terribly unromantic take on love. And yet it is this unromantic take that accounts for its curative function: an alleviation of suffering through the growth of one’s soul. The analyst may unwittingly spark the analysand’s love, but she also arrests its untimely repetitions, which allow for new iterations loosened from the grip of parental triangulation. What better name for this than love?

One interpretation of the Psyche myth is that suffering is a form of preparation for love. And it is only with the help of others that Psyche endures the suffering. After the gods allow Eros and Psyche to marry, Psyche is granted immortality and becomes known as the goddess of the human soul.

14 Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (Basic Books, 1962), 88.

15 Janet Malcolm, *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession* (Knopf, 1982), 6.

I was suffering not because I had a jealous Aphrodite intent on spoiling my happiness but because my soul was in retreat. Like Lóri, I was fighting my own intense urge to come closer to the impossible part—the vibrant unknown part—of another human being, and of myself.

Had I understood transference better, I might have wondered why I experienced love as absence.

——— *The soul is nothing without its trials*

So, without understanding what she was doing [...] she put too much makeup on her eyes and mouth until her powder-white face looked like a mask: she was putting someone else on top of herself: that someone was fantastically uninhibited, was vain, was proud of herself. That someone was exactly what she wasn't. [...] The mask was making her uncomfortable, she knew moreover that she was prettier without makeup. But without makeup it would be the nakedness of soul. And she still couldn't risk that or allow herself that luxury.

—Lispector, *An Apprenticeship*¹⁶

When my analyst said, “We all have stuff,” she could also have said, “We all have masks.” Lóri may know she’s prettier without makeup, but the obstacle—the mask—is often easier to bear than a naked soul. Lóri knows that her journey will only be complete when she experiences love between naked souls. But the task—the trials—may seem nearly impossible without the adornment of a mask. Masks are familiar, and living behind them feels like protection.

At some point, my analyst began to notice that I was showing up to our sessions adorned in other people’s words. I enjoyed this literary recognition. Assembling a self from literary fragments was an aesthetic practice I had honed over many years. It is a habit that’s hard to shake—I am still doing it here, leaning on the words of others to buffer my naked soul. Syllables

16 Lispector, *An Apprenticeship or The Book of Pleasures*, 71.

that spoke of needs and feelings embarrassed me; such language seemed flimsy, desperate, needy. Seeking refuge in the words of others provided comfort. Their words seemed to be made of sturdier stuff, the kind of stuff that could guard my naked soul.

Then one day, my analyst revealed that she was onto me.

"Come on, Lenù," she said with her unmistakable directness.

"Did you just call me Lenù?" I asked in amazement, feeling exposed and impressed.

"Yes," she said simply.

We had shared an appreciation of Elena Ferrante's novels, but they had not come up since she had asked me about the title of the first in the Neapolitan series, *My Brilliant Friend*. I'd said that I wished I was bold and uninhibited like Lila but that I was obviously Lenù: reserved, hesitant, rule-following, unsure of saying the wrong thing lest I be, well, wrong, not perfect, and therefore bad, in trouble.

She told me to put myself out there more, to take more risks, more emotional risks. "What are you waiting for?" she asked.

When I insisted that I was trying, she told me to try more. When I protested that I had changed so much, she matter-of-factly reported that I still had a long way to go.

I wanted her to recognize my progress. She hesitated. I pushed.

I craved acknowledgment for the work I was doing; she questioned why I needed her approval.

I was doing so much! I wanted her to applaud my trials and my progress. And I wanted encouragement if I still had so far to go. I was, after all, preparing to leave my hateful job, teaching classes on the side to prepare for that financial loss, training to be an analyst, trying to date, and subjecting myself to my own analysis to get better at all of it. To get better at being me. What more did she want?

But if she gave her approval, I would learn that my changes needed validation from another and risk making a new mask in the image of who she wanted me to be, adorning myself in her desire. I would become a self that needed the approval of others, a mask that needed an audience. And yet, I could only become

me *with her*. Not in the trap of recognition, but in relation to her, with her as a guide to the unknown. In her position of not knowing, she was uniquely positioned to help me feel my way toward my own naked soul.

But as I kept working to reveal my naked soul, my dating life increasingly baffled me. Dating was suddenly ... hard and confusing. My soul was newly sensitive to the delights of other souls, but my relationships flared and sizzled with the regularity of the seasons. There was a new stammering between me and my analyst too, a new tension in tempo with my dating life. It felt like Eros was eluding me at every turn. My analyst's interpretations — about my soul or those of others — suddenly seemed to be adjusted to a frequency I could not tune into.

The core of our conflicts, I believed at the time, was that she thought I was secretly straight. She fretted at not having had the chance to witness the brief relationship I'd had with a man a few years before. I explained that this dating experience had been an experiment to test whether I had resolved the gender issues I had with heterosexuality. I didn't like being *the girl* to a man; I didn't like the scripted gender roles that seemed to ensnare me so thoughtlessly.

Once I translated femininity into a shape that fit my form, I thought heterosexuality might become a viable option — like I could choose it, which would be convenient because it was also the most expedient way to have a baby. After all, I clarified to my analyst, I became queer accidentally, on account of a suggestive question made by a friend in my teens. So it wasn't that my experiment in dating a man had failed; rather, it confirmed that queerness became me.

She was baffled by my unorthodox ideas, which didn't accord with more familiar models that would explain how a rejection by a father (and the failures implied by divorce) prevented me from internalizing the object choice of a man. Or how the shame a mother felt about sexuality would be transferred onto me. These models, apparently, could explain my dating woes or why, as my analyst asked me one day, I was attracted to "man-nish women."

I laughed. "Seriously? What is this, the 1920s? No one says, 'mannish women,'" I scolded her.

She shrugged, commenting that she was old and that it was an old-fashioned phrase.

"You're not that old," I said, "and you live in New York City. Come on."

When I proposed that she thought I was secretly straight, she'd simply say, "I know that's what you think."

Looking back, I suppose she thought we were working in the transference. Working in the transference facilitates the awareness of what's being unconsciously repeated, what resists being known. When the transference is analyzed, the mask slips. The naked soul of the analysand may desperately look around for any available mask, but if she works through this exposure, it no longer casts the long shadow of predestination over her attachments.

Looking back again, I wonder why we were spending time trying to figure out the roots of my queer desire. Some might think she was trying to get at the root to eradicate it.

I wasn't sure I wanted to — or could — explain queer desire, but I found myself trying to explain how queerness often does gender differently, how I've long cultivated a specifically queer femininity that refuses capture by heterosexuality, insisting that anyone who knew how to look could see the difference. I was drawn to a certain masculinity in women and to others who weren't endowed with a right to it from birth, a masculinity that was blurred and bent so it could be inhabited in a way thoughtfully subtracted from compulsory heterosexuality.

She interpreted this as a "compromise formation." The father rejection, she postulated, led me to compromise, settling for a displaced "masculinity" in an ostensibly safer "feminine" form.

I love my compromise formation!

I didn't say this at the time — but I would say it to an old lover I'd soon re-find who saw the queer humor in it and dedicated George Michael's "Father Figure" to me in a saucy text message. In the moment, though, I gritted my teeth and tried to bring my analyst up to speed on the last twenty-five years of gender

theory. Isn't it obvious that *all* sexuality is a compromise formation? If it weren't, we'd all still be hooked on our mothers.

It would take me years to consider the possibility that we were in an enactment. Enactments draw the analyst and the analysand together into an inadvertent repetition, where something unknown in the analyst's own unconscious comes to be acted out in the transference. Enactments are disquieting stalemates, but they can lead to transformative outcomes once they've been worked through. But we were not working through. I felt misunderstood, and frustrated. I wanted to be talking about other stuff, like the lover I had just refound. On this point, I can almost still hear my analyst: "This stuff *is* the other stuff."

My soul was indeed going through its trials.

————— *The soul does not abide clock time*

Lóri would never forget the help she'd received when she could only manage to stammer with fear.

— Lisorpector, *An Apprenticeship*¹⁷

As if the trials of my soul weren't hard enough, I then encountered myself as an obstacle. It came in the unlikely form of finding love. Or, rather, refinding it. I had loved this person before. My analyst knew all about her. There was a whole series of dreams filed under her name. We had discussed the latest dream only hours before I ran into this ex at a Sleater-Kinney concert.

The next day, when I told my analyst about this run-in, her face was likely neutral, but I'd swear I read in it a flash of unease that seemed to say, "Not that one."

"Yes, *this* one!" something in me shouted in silent response. Suddenly, all the ambivalence I'd had about this person dissolved into crisp winter-air focus: I wanted her. I was living the wrong life, I now realized, by not having stayed with her — if not the first time we dated twenty years ago, then certainly the second time eleven years later or else one of the other less-defined

17 Lisorpector, *An Apprenticeship or The Book of Pleasures*, 109.

times we'd been together. A tidal wave of regret at all our break-ups crashed over me. The on-and-off affairs we'd had for years clearly pointed to the certainty that we were meant for each other. I wanted to take back every ending we'd had. My analyst was pushing me to put myself out there, to take more emotional risks. I was suddenly ready. Being with her, I decided (as if it were a matter of deciding), I could make up for lost time.

Desire is a thick concept for psychoanalysis, and I don't mean to make it thin by recalling one thread from Lacan about its impossible satisfaction. There is something intractable, though, about the idea of the remainder that Lacan insists on, the idea that something inevitably remains unsatisfied with every repeated attempt to respond to desire's call. Desire, after all, does not abide the logic of clock time.

A strand of this desire is also present in this writing. Because an essay will always be in tension with the time and syntax of psychic life, I've tried to embrace some of the disorderly, non-linear process of psychoanalytic soul-fashioning in the variably numbered dashes that cut into each section. With the fragments, too. That indicate the partial knowledge by which I proceed.

I borrow this strategy about how to give shape to dizzying experiences from *The Passion According to G.H.*, the novel Lispector wrote just before *An Apprenticeship*. In *G.H.*, which opens with seven dashes and closes with six, Lispector shows with this device how a character's disorganizing experience cannot be neatly transposed into textual form. The dashes signal a typographical cutting into an experience that is likened to an infinite piece of meat. One could die before an infinite piece of meat; one must cut. And because cutting an experience into digestible size is simultaneously a cutting into oneself, the cutting inevitably excises part of G.H. herself. Lispector's dashes gesture toward the way textual form bends around a transformed self. My dashes, too, signal a transformation-in-process and keep the page open, porous to the ongoingness of the world and to future ways of knowing that may diverge from what I know now.

(I know I must forfeit part of myself to digest the experiences narrated in this section. Or, rather, I know that a part of my soul

has already been forfeited — lost — but I don't yet know what part. This section still has the feel of an infinite piece of meat. When I know what was lost, I can cut....)

Time felt like it was collapsing as I began to spend time with my old lover — the past feelings between us bloomed into the present. My analyst was skeptical. She suggested I was not taking the bold new risk I thought I was. No, I was repeating an old pattern by choosing an unavailable object — my old lover was now married. It didn't matter to my analyst that my lover had told me that she'd married the wrong person. What mattered, my analyst suggested, was the resurfacing of a pattern of attraction to someone whose attention was split, distracted, and diluted. My old lover wasn't ready to change anything to be with me. She seemed content to repeat the secret relationship we'd had ten years earlier. No one in her life knew about me or our late-night happy hours, our spontaneous rendezvous. The emotional intensity wasn't love, my analyst suggested, but the charge of an earlier unmet desire.

Was the intensity of my rediscovered love a repetition of distracted unavailability that echoed from my childhood? Freud would likely agree with my analyst, but I didn't want to hear it. Everything capsized when this affair began. I didn't want analytic interpretations of unconscious repetitions — I had love!

Because I was in the tremors of my rediscovered love, I perceived my analyst as a large looming obstacle. Her focus on my sexuality baffled me as much as the long silences that began to punctuate our sessions. Some of the upheaval could be attributed to COVID and adjusting to having our sessions on the phone. But even the chaos of early COVID in New York City couldn't explain all the sudden oddities of our session. By the time she forgot a couple of sessions and then called me at the wrong time, things felt decidedly off. I finally asked her what was going on. "Things feel weird," I said.

She didn't feel weirdness, she responded, suggesting it might be something going on with me.

I'm sure there was something going on with me, and I wished she'd helped me figure it out. At the time, I was simply confused.

The idea that she contributed nothing to our dynamic went against everything I had been learning about relational psychoanalysis. I asked her again if it were possible that we were co-creating whatever was going on between us. She suggested that I was deflecting from the shame I felt about my sexuality, a shame that intensified with my current love affair.

The word “shame” didn’t match the defiant insistence I exercised in pursuing my desire. “I only have this fight with you,” I told her.

“And your mother,” she said.

I hesitated. I wasn’t sure that was true, but I also wasn’t sure it was untrue.

The day I asked my analyst why things felt off was the beginning of an end I could never have imagined. Shortly after our session ended, she sent a series of texts saying she had to take a few months off for medical reasons. She apologized for not giving more notice. I was alarmed, worried. She was old — would she be all right? My mind was racing but came to an immediate halt when I read the last line of her message, which couched an apology for the abruptness within a comment about our discussion of this possible break during our last session.

“No,” I screamed at my phone, “we didn’t discuss this! You said nothing was wrong!” I was upset but didn’t want to disturb her while she was having health issues. I resolved to talk to her about it when she recovered and came back in a few months.

When she didn’t come back in the fall, I thought she was dying. I tried to get answers but, honestly, I didn’t try very hard. I wasn’t sure how much I could know given the nature of our relationship.

I thought about my analyst all the time. I was still unsettled by our disagreements and was beginning to wonder if she might have been right. I wanted to talk with her about the inconstancies of my old lover, whose demanding work could only partially explain why the initial chaotic joy of being together again was stuttering into hesitancy and silence.

COVID brought with it many struggling souls seeking the balm of psychoanalysis. Stuck at home, I had time to take on

more patients, so I was quickly accumulating the required hours to complete psychoanalytic training. My apprenticeship was ending, and not-knowing was seeping into me, becoming etched into my soul.

When I graduated the following year, someone told me that my analyst was not dying. She was better but would not be returning to her practice. I tried to learn more, but all I gathered was that she was alive, her health had improved, and she was never coming back.

I was relieved she wasn't dying. I waited to feel sad or angry, but I didn't. Much later, I'd realize I was still waiting for her to come back. Maybe, in some ways, I still am.

After all, once Psyche endured her trials, Eros came back. Through what trial could I bring my analyst back? What would happen to my soul, languishing in partial formation?

A few months later, my old lover and I separated. Wordlessly, definitively.

Had I, like Psyche, dripped oil on those who were bringing me to love? Had I caused everyone to flee when I craved more than the shadows of their appearance? What new suffering awaited my soul?

I felt absence all around me.

When Lóri's soul was formed, she was ready for Ulysses. It was an encounter of soul intimacy I still could not understand.

I turned back to the beginning of Lóri's journey where Ulysses speaks to her in words that resemble those of an analyst: "We haven't used the word love so as not to have to recognize its contexture of hate, love, jealousy and so many other contradictories."¹⁸ Perhaps in using the word "love," I'd missed how it was woven into hate and jealousy. There were so many things I didn't know.

Ulysses goes on to say: "Many of us make art because we don't know what the other thing is like. We've disguised our indifference with false love, knowing that our indifference is disguised anguish. We've disguised with a small fear the greatest fear of all

18 Lisspector, *An Apprenticeship or The Book of Pleasures*, 37.

and that's why we never speak of what really matters."¹⁹ With so much unknowing, art — writing — comes to seem steady, reliable. Making sentences is a way of making sense, which is some kind of comfort in the face of so much absence.

Ulysses says to Lóri, "Listen: you can learn anything, even how to love!"²⁰ And she had. What had I learned? What kind of apprenticeship leaves one with such absence?

— *The frivolous and ill-advised activity of creating a soul*

We have neither the time nor the space needed to create a soul for ourselves, and the mere hint of such activity seems frivolous and ill-advised.

— Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*²¹

I learn from you but you think that I learned from your lessons, yet that wasn't it, I learned something you weren't even dreaming of teaching me.

— Lisspector, *An Apprenticeship*²²

It's easy to mistake one thing for another. It's easy because one thing can flip into its opposite — like love and hate, presence and absence, beginnings and endings. Sometimes it depends on perspective, on where you are in the journey, the trial or the reconciliation. *An Apprenticeship*, for example, begins with a comma that seems to interrupt Lóri's flow — the first period comes, breathlessly, two-and-a-half pages in. The comma is inserted amid a flurry of movement and thought that seems to have begun before the novel commenced. It's a sneaky literary device: How can there be a beginning before the beginning? And yet, of course, there always is, as Lisspector brilliantly describes in

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 40.

²¹ Julia Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans. Ross Mitchell Guberman (Columbia University Press, 1995), 7.

²² Lisspector, *An Apprenticeship or The Book of Pleasures*, 140.

the opening pages of *The Hour of the Star*. In *An Apprenticeship*, the comma that stands at the entrance to the text might indicate pitch, borrowing a musical notation to alert us to the alternating frequencies of Lóri's impending changes. Because the novel follows Lóri's internal transformation — the formation of her soul — it's sometimes hard to track the tempos of impasse and of change.

Then again, changes can be difficult to mark. For example, it's not simply the move from the couch to the chair that marked my transition from the ignorant knowing of the candidate to the serviceable not-knowing of the analyst. It is enormously difficult to surrender the desire for mastery in favor of the solicitation of curiosity.

I'm often, like Lóri, scuttling from one thing to another, but my losses slowed me down. I began to reflect on what these losses might teach me about not knowing. I began to write. I began to cut into experience, and through the cuts I found words for feelings I hadn't touched before. Words no longer eviscerated the thing but brought feelings, experiences, even people into a flickering clarity. Writing gave me a knowing punctuated by bright spots of not-knowing but also a knowing imbued with fleeting understanding.

Writing gave me a new way to understand the epigraph to this chapter — "Psychoanalysis [...] is an apprenticeship in living beyond despair" — which has long been posted on the wall above my computer. When I refound the full quote in Kristeva's "On the Melancholic Imaginary," I found more than I expected: "Psychoanalysis — a laic discourse creating and dissolving the transferential bond — is an apprenticeship in living beyond despair; not by a manic defense countering it, but through a receptivity to it, an endowing of it with meaning."²³ I was struck by the sudden insight that writing, too, exercised a capacity for new signifying bonds, new meaning, that is only possible with absence. I found myself at a new horizon where I could reflect

23 Kristeva, "On the Melancholic Imaginary," 121.

on how the psychoanalytic stance of not knowing hinges on internalizing absence.

There's a wistful quality to some of the concepts that psychoanalysis has developed to theorize absence. Melancholia, for example, posits that the psychic experience of loving endures beyond the loss. Freud distinguishes between mourning (the proper, completed act of divesting libidinally from a lost object) and melancholia (the incomplete mourning that internalizes the object such that the shadow of the object envelops the ego). He famously says that with melancholia one knows "*whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost."²⁴ But, to my mind, this distinction between mourning and melancholia never truly holds. Something of the lost object *always* endures. Threads of pleasure and pain — of love and hate — quilt every lost object into the very formation of the soul. It is not about divesting from the object or incorporating it, as Freud would have us believe. Rather, internalizing absence requires that we forgo this distinction and suspend the desire for return.

Years later I glimpsed my analyst's insight about the unconscious repetitions I was playing out with my old lover, how our affair drew me into a vortex that tugged at me with undercurrents from my childhood, where I attempted to ignore what I wasn't getting in favor of the scant attention I did. My old lover gave me slivers of herself, and I quivered in small doses. But the whole affair was adulterated with unmet desires, which is why it left me so wanting. Passionately, terminally.

I was beginning to be okay with not knowing what I'd lost, what of my soul had been forfeited in my losses. I sensed that my soul could grow around these absences.

Freud notes that there is no difference between transference love and so-called normal love — they are experienced as the same by the analysand. At the same time, there is a crucial dis-

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14: *On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement: Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works (1914–1916)*, ed. and trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud (Hogarth Press, 1957), 245.

tion — the analyst refuses to return the patient's love. This refusal of return is what services the cure. In analysis, the cure is sutured to the desire for and absence of love.

Ultimately, Eros can't stay with Psyche, and Psyche can't follow Eros when he flees. But other versions of this story — other versions of love — are possible.

Combining the poetic with the quasi-scientific, Wilfred Bion offers another understanding of absence. Bion borrows from the Romantic poet John Keats the term “negative capability” to describe someone capable of “being in uncertainties,” prizing mystery and doubt above fact and reason. Negative capability allows one to inhabit the unknown. In Bion's terms, where O is the unknown and unknowable and K is “the evolution” of O into a sensible form of knowledge (like memory), the psychoanalyst “*is concerned with O*, which is incommunicable save through K activity.”²⁵ The unknown speaks in a foreign tongue and a strange logic through the tidy grammar of what is known. Knowledge is thus an orientation toward the unknown. They expand and contract in relation to each other.

My apprenticeship was teaching me about loss, about how the soul is assembled through loves and losses, absences that will orient the soul toward other souls.

I was learning that occupying the position that Lacan describes as the *sujet supposé savoir* involved walking along the edge of what Bion describes as O and K, where unknown and known elements dilate and compress.

I was learning something I hadn't been taught. It wasn't that the unknown was being converted into something known; I was learning that an unknown charge pulses at the very heart of everything known.

I was becoming acquainted with new rhythms of my soul.

Freud describes analysis as either terminable or interminable. Mine was neither. It was suspended — it never ended, and it never will; traces of it linger in me still. The same could be said

25 Wilfred Bion, *Attention and Interpretation* (Karnac Books, 1984), 30 (emphasis mine).

of my old lover. We parted tacitly knowing we would never see each other again. We'd also done that many times before. How is it possible to know something is over when it hasn't ended?

An Apprenticeship ends by not ending. Having become lovers, Lóri and Ulisses lie together reflecting on the soulful path that's been traveled. Lóri says, "I know that my path has reached its end: I mean I reached the door of a beginning."²⁶ When Lóri asks Ulisses what he thinks about the process of forming a soul and coming to soul intimacy with her, his response serves as the last lines of the text:

—I think, the man interrupted and his voice was slow and muffled because he was suffering from life and from love, this is what I think:

The colon, as the last mark of the text, creates an opening side-stepping an ending, much as the comma at the beginning of the novel hedges a beginning. The colon marks an enduring absence of words that is nonetheless full of meaning. Maintaining this openness affirms uncertainty. It is evident *that* Ulisses thinks even if it is not evident *what* he thinks. Not knowing the content of Ulisses's thoughts effectively shifts attention to his *capacity* for thinking.

Like Lóri and Ulisses, I found that the capacity for not knowing tarried at the threshold of knowing. Freud says that psychoanalysis is a cure through love, but it's equally a cure through the loss of love, through absence. Absence, and nothing less, builds the capacity for new love.

Internalizing absence engenders the capacity not merely to tolerate not-knowing but also to welcome it as integral to psychoanalysis as the modern art of forming a soul. Such an absence creates an energetic space that pulses with possibility. It allows the soul to reach toward the unknown part of others, to discover how the naked soul of another human can light you on fire. Such an absence, such a capacity, opens the soul to love.

26 Lispector, *An Apprenticeship or The Book of Pleasures*, 141.

Bibliography

- Apuleius, Lucius. *The Golden Ass*. Translated by Sarah Ruden. Yale University Press, 2013.
- Bion, Wilfred. *Attention and Interpretation*. Karnac Books, 1984.
- Duras, Marguerite. *La maladie de la mort*. Les Éditions de Minuit, 1982.
- Fink, Bruce. *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique*. Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 14: *On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement: Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works (1914–1916)*, edited and translated by James Strachey with Anna Freud. Hogarth Press, 1957.
- . *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Translated by James Strachey. Basic Books, 1962.
- Freud, Sigmund, and Carl Jung. *The Freud/Jung Letters: The Correspondence between Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung*. Edited by William McGuire. Translated by R.F.C. Hull and Ralph Manheim. Abridged paperback ed. Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Kristeva, Julia. *New Maladies of the Soul*. Translated by Ross Mitchell Guberman. Columbia University Press, 1995.
- . "On the Melancholic Imaginary." In *Discourse in Psychoanalysis and Literature*, edited by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, translated by Louise Burchill. Methuen & Co., 1987.
- Lacan, Jacques. "Seminar XII: Crucial Problems." Translated by Cormac Gallagher. Unpublished manuscript, 1964.
- Lispector, Clarice. *An Apprenticeship or The Book of Pleasures*. Translated by Stefan Tobler. Penguin Classics, 2021.
- . *The Passion According to G.H.* Translated by Idra Novey. New Directions, 2012.
- . *Uma aprendizagem ou o livro dos prazeres*. Editora Rocco, 1969.

Malcolm, Janet. *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession*.
Knopf, 1982.

نرگس/Narges/Narcissus¹

poupeh missaghi

Narcissus, we are told by the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, is “a bulbous Eurasian plant of a genus that includes the daffodil, especially (in gardening) one with flowers that have white or pale outer petals and a shallow orange or yellow cup in the center.”² We are also told that it is of “Genus Narcissus, family Liliaceae (or Amaryllidaceae)” and that it has “many species and varieties, in particular *N. poeticus*.”³ It is of these species and varieties that I want to speak to you today, my dear reader, not in the botanical sense of the flower but in the personal world-making sense of it, in the translational, transnational sense and the many migrations between the “there” of my life and the “here” of my life, arriving and departing from myself. A bilingual dictionary or the languages menu of Wikipedia will tell you that the English word “narcissus” is *narges* نرگس in Persian, but Wikipedia’s equivalent is not quite right, hides so much, reveals very little. So come sit with me and let me tell you a story.

¹ This essay is part of a manuscript in progress with the working title *Flowers in Bloom, a Bilingual Encyclopedia*.

² *New Oxford American Dictionary*, Apple version 2.3.0, s.v. “narcissus.”

³ *Ibid.*

Narges is my favorite flower, the one that makes my heart stop, and so I can say, without reservation, that I love it, the way you love a nonhuman, or — why separate? — the way you love a human too; that's how I feel I love the flower. *Narges* is for me the scent of winters in Tehran, and, only a few years ago, many years after this love story started, I learned that it is the flower for my birth month — the month of Āzar آذر, the ninth month on the Persian calendar. This is the month of fire, not just astrologically but also literally in the Persian word, and its tenth or eleventh day marks the beginning of the month of December — and so now it makes complete sense to me that *narges* for me is the scent of winters in Tehran, the city of my birth, my dreams, my daydreams, the city I hope one day to return to, the city of the first language in my body, a language whose embrace of *narges* is quite different from that of its English relative, narcissus. The English name of the flower shares its etymology with “narcissism,” the concept Freud derived from the Greek myth of Narcissus, the beautiful youth who fell in love with his own reflection in the glassy surface of a pool and, after pining away, was changed into the flower that bears his name.⁴ It was he, via Freud, who introduced to us to the concept of narcissism — that is, the “adoration one accords [oneself] in light of [...] being an object of sexual desire”⁵ — and thus to the narcissistic type: one loving what one is, what one was, what one would like to be, or, alternatively, an other who was once part of oneself.⁶ Now, does this mean that the flower in English is a narcissist but that its Persian counterpart has no awareness of this psychic condition? (Can a nonhuman even be a narcissist?) Does this mean that

4 Ibid.

5 “On Narcissism, 1914, by Sigmund Freud,” *sigmundfreud.net*, <https://www.sigmundfreud.net/on-narcissism.jsp>.

6 Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14: *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works (1914–1916)*, ed. and trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud (Hogarth Press, 1957), 90.

a flower experiences love for the self and the other differently, depending on language? (Can a flower even experience love?)

Thinking about love can send us in many different directions, but I have been pondering it for a while through what Hannah Arendt says in *The Life of the Mind*, specifically in the section “Augustine, the First Philosopher of the Will,” he known as the person who originated the genre of the confession. (Today the term “confession” is mainly used for writings by women or, rather, by nonmale authors, not for writings by men, even if they, too, write autobiographically and confess to what they have done in their lives.) Augustine, according to Arendt, “diagnoses the ultimate unifying will that eventually decides a man’s conduct as Love.”⁷ And the key here for me is the word “will,” reminding me that love is not just there to give or to be received but that it needs to be willed. I may be totally wrong in my reading of what Augustine says, but this is what I am hearing, where I’m pausing. Continuing her study of Augustine’s views, Arendt writes, “Love is the ‘weight of the soul,’ its law of gravitation, that which brings the soul’s movement to its rest.”⁸ Further on, Arendt notes Augustine’s emphasis on love and its relation to the mind:

The love that stills the will’s turmoil and restlessness is not a love of tangible things but of the “footprints” [that] “sensible things” have left on the inwardness of the mind. [...] In the case of Love, the lasting “footprint” that the mind has transformed into an intelligible thing would be neither the one who loves nor his beloved but the third element, namely, Love itself, the love with which the lovers love each other.⁹

When I took an online course at the Brooklyn Institute of Social Research on Hannah Arendt, taught by Samantha Rose, whose book on Arendt came out in 2021, I jotted down in my note-

7 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (Mariner Books Classics, 1981), 95.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 103.

book, "What you love is not the thing itself but the impression it leaves on you," and "We should not just be thinking about the other or about justice; it is necessary to love justice/to love the other."

But how can love for the other and love for justice join each other and accompany each other while we are situated within the larger corrupt systems of the world, of which not only the politicians but also we are participants and not mere observers? And what is the use of these two terms sitting next to each other, when *narges* is bundles of narcissi that "children of work"¹⁰ sell at the intersections of Tehran streets, moving around and between cars idling at a red light while its timer counts the seconds down or stays frozen on some random number while a police officer manually guides the traffic, often making it worse than it needs to be? The flowers smell like the heavens, make you fall in love again and again, but you can't separate that love from your heart breaking for the kids trying to sell them, kids whose very naming comes from their having been forced to earn a living. When they arrive in town (they being the flowers, not the "children of work," because the children are always there, merely changing jobs with the seasons), it is either *Ābān* آبان or early *Āzar*, the season of fall. At this time, the weather is getting colder in Tehran and, because of the environmental phenomenon known as air inversion, the air is more polluted than in the other months of the year. And these young kids, who work in the streets even on the days the air pollution markers are on dangerous and there are warnings for the young and the old to stay at home, are exposed to it more than many other residents of the city. These flower kids should not be there working. They should be smelling these flowers and not selling them.

So what does love have to do with it when you fall in love through the flowers and with the flowers, with the kids selling you the flowers and the streets that become their open-air flower shops? In the end, your mere love for the other and for

10 Underage workers in Tehran are called *kudakān-e kār* کودکان کار (children of work).

justice fails to have any power over the lives of the children who hand you your bundle of *narges*. In the end, you leave, you have left not only the streets to go back to your apartment but also — zooming out the digital map — the neighborhood, the city, the country, the region, your homeland; you have left them behind and with them a big part of yourself, justice never attained, not even looming on the horizon.

It was in the month of Ābān of the year 2019, the month that every year my beloved flower makes an appearance in my beloved city, that hundreds of Iranians were brutally killed during protests against the sudden rise of gas prices. They were killed while the internet was shut down, turning the map of data and internet traffic in the country completely black, while I and many others abroad stared at our phones every second of the day and night, waiting for some news, any news, to reach us from the void that had opened in front of us, devouring many of our loved ones. And it was in the month of Ābān of the year 2021 that an international “people’s tribunal,” the first in the history of Iran, was held, not in Tehran but in London, to investigate crimes against human rights committed by the Islamic Republic regime specifically with regard to the events of November 2019. Witnesses provided evidence of the killing of more than 300 Iranians, including children, in that 2019 month now called Ābān-e Xunin آبان خونین, (Bloody November).

But this translation is not the same as the original phrase, because what do you, my dear reader in English, know of those days of bloodbath, those days of silent horror? Even if you do know of those days, I doubt that you felt any of its horror, carry traces of it in your body tissues, or fear it happening once again. You might disagree with me, thinking about empathy and our capacity to feel it, but when it comes to empathy, I’m often reminded of what Natalia Diaz said in conversation with David Naimon on a *Between the Covers* podcast — that empathy is impossible because even if we feel another person’s pain, we are still feeling it through our own body, in our own shoes, not theirs. She also raised an important point about it that I have not been able to shake off since I first heard it in the small kitchen of

my Brooklyn apartment. She said, “If there really was empathy, I wouldn’t be able to take it. [...] Because I can’t imagine [something that is happening elsewhere] happening to me, here we are. I guess the thing is [that] the only thing that feels at stake in empathy is that it has not happened to me.”¹¹

And this is true of me and the children selling my beloved flowers; otherwise, I couldn’t have, once upon a time, bought the flowers, gotten home, and arranged them in vases, each time a different one — the round matte-blue one with starlike engravings or the short but large see-through rectangular one with metal flowers on one side — depending on how many bunches I had bought, enjoying their scent and their beauty when I knew I had left behind the kids. Or, if I truly empathized, I would feel paralyzed even writing about the kids when I know that in the year 2023 their situation was more dire as a result of the horrifying economic conditions in Iran. Where are the love and empathy and the will for action in all this? How could the beauty and the scent of *narges* protect the kids and the people of my country against the bullets, literal and figurative, being aimed at them from all sides?

And this is not just about 2019, which seems like a faraway history while also right here right now; I’m also talking about 2009 and the 1980s and all the dates in between and about the chronological here and now, the years 1401 ۱۴۰۱ (2022) and 1402 ۱۴۰۲ (2023), the months of the Mahsa-Jina revolutionary uprising, which for you, my dear reader using a Gregorian calendar, translate to September 2022 and onward, a time in which the regime’s violence has been escalating, its forces of evil growing more and more brutal and naked, as have the forces of Woman, of Life, of Freedom. The numbers of the youth imprisoned and killed with bullets in the streets or executed by hanging are rising and rising because the voices of the youth have been rising and rising, becoming louder than ever before, along with their

11 Natalie Diaz, “Postcolonial Love Poem: Part One,” interview with David Naimon, *Between the Covers*, July 14, 2023, <https://milkweed.org/between-the-covers/natalie-diaz-postcolonial-love-poem-part-one>.

clarity of vision, their fierceness, their creativity, and their imagination of possible futures.

You know, amidst this battle (a battle about which I could speak with you for pages and pages but won't for word-count reasons, a battle I will invite you to learn more about not as information from the news and headlines but in your body from witness narratives that allow you to experience the daily violence and resistance through the art of life) that feels to me, in my body and my psyche, like a mythical one that has already forever changed us perhaps more significantly than ever, the flower *narges* has also, strangely, found a way to be present. I see it in images offered by families and friends to prisoners who have just left the notorious Evin Prison of Tehran, left not as exonerated but as freed on bail. I see *narges* flowers in the hands of Taraneh Alidousti ترانه علیدوستی and Arash Sadeghi آرش صادقی and many others, especially the youth, whose age and beauty remind me not of the Greek myth of Narcissus and of his obsession with and desire for the self, not of the polished and curated image of the self presented to the other via social media, which seems to be the malady of our times, but instead of the classical Persian poem by Attar, dating back to the twelfth century CE: *Manṭiq-ut Tīr* منطق الطیر (*Conference of the Birds*).

The story of the poem, if I can summarize it in a few sentences, goes like this. A group of birds sets out on a journey to search for the bird *simorgh*, only to arrive at Qaf Mountain and find no *simorgh* there. Seeing only their own reflection in the lake, they realize that the *simorgh* is all of them together looking at their reflection, thirty birds completing the hard journey. The poem acknowledges and celebrates collective action — not only on the narrative level of the poem's journey but also on a linguistic level — because the Persian word for *simorgh* سیمرغ is literally constituted by the two words *si* سی (thirty) and *morgh* مرغ (bird).

And, so, because the killing of the young Iranian Kurdish woman Mahsa-Jina Amini in the custody of the so-called morality police in September 2022 brought out thousands of Iranians, led and inspired by Gen Z, it has been in this poem of the birds conferencing and journeying and making a discovery in

their group reflection in the water that I find the beauty, perseverance, and growth of the youth of Iran.

This collective reflection also reminds me of one of contemporary Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama's artworks, *Narcissus Garden*, that brings us in a circular way back to the myth of Narcissus. Consisting of 1,500 mirrored plastic globes, the work, first exhibited in 1966, moves narcissism from the individual to the collective level, from an individual to all those who stop by the globes to look at them, which inevitably makes them look at their own reflections and the reflections of others around them.

Kusama's poking fun at collective narcissism aptly brings me to think about all those enamored with their own image who keep running various systems of governance — not just in Iran but all around the world — manipulating ideologies for their own sake and holding on to toxic patriarchies, unable to question themselves, unable to keep themselves open to revolutionized modes of creating and being created, unable to speculate about futures rooted in love for the land and the other.

You know, my dear reader, the ones at the helm of the Islamic Republic regime in Iran, in their continuously growing avarice for power and control and perverse love, have confiscated and polluted all resources, even my beloved flower *narges*, to curate their desired images and narratives. I was once looking through the internet to find images of narcissi farms during the harvest season — for example, in the Behbahan region of Khuzestan province or in the Jouybar region of Mazandaran province — and I found two news articles involving uses of the flower in government-sanctioned ceremonies.

One article tells me about 8,000 *narges* flowers being dedicated to and displayed at the shrine of the eighth Shia Imam, Imam Reza, in the city of Mashhad, and that the annual ceremony is registered as an Iranian national intangible heritage.

The second article tells me about 15,000 *narges* flowers being dedicated to the second anniversary of the killing of Islamic Republic commander Qasem Soleimani by a US drone strike on January 3, 2020 — 7,000 sent to Baghdad airport where the assassination happened and 8,000 to his burial site in the Kerman

province of Iran. This article also mentions 15,000 more flowers being sent to various holy shrines in cities in Iran and Iraq. The image used for the second article shows many bundles of narcissi arranged on an open-air table, behind which sit several men, most wearing COVID-19 masks (a few not properly, i.e., not covering their noses), including a cleric sitting at the table. Behind the men are two photographers, a woman and a man, both taking pictures with their phones, and a few other masked men standing as if in attendance. The photo bothers me in ways I cannot fully explain, yet it is not the beauty and vulnerability of the narcissi set against these men at the helm, or maybe not just that, but imagining the scent of the flowers overflowing in the air around them as they offer my beloved flower to causes of their own agenda. Perhaps I should not be surprised by this confiscation of nature for ideology, given the myth recounted about the flower being birthed from the tears of Imam Reza.

Another thing I've just remembered from my school days ties the flower to religious storytelling. *Narges* نرگس, or rather its Arabic equivalent *narjes* نرجس (there is no *g* گ sound in Arabic), is said to be the name of the mother of the twelfth Shia Imam. According to some, she is the daughter of a Roman emperor who was taken as a slave and bought by the tenth Imam, Imam Hadi, who then became the wife of the eleventh Imam, Imam Hassan Askari, finally becoming the mother of Mahdi, who, in Shia Islam, is believed to appear at the end of times to save the world from evil. If the mother of the Shia messianic figure, the woman who has given birth to the man whose absence has defined so much history, does not get to be a narcissist, who then? But, joking aside, I want to return to some more personal stories in order to move my beloved flower away from patriarchal stories and ceremonies and bring it back into my intimate space.

The particular type of narcissus that I love, the *narges* I constantly bought throughout its season in Tehran, is hard to find in Brooklyn and Denver, the two places I've been living for the past several years. Daffodils, yes, you can find, and they are plentiful, but not the *narges* that actually is *nargese* شیراز *Širāz*, a name that translates as "narcissus from the city of Shiraz," which is in

the Fars province of Iran and is known as the city of flowers and wine. According to some, this is the city from which the vines in Australia giving life to Shiraz wine originated; it is also the city of Hafez, the Iranian poet, who is widely translated and read in the English language, albeit not as much as Rumi, both of whose poems in English translation are far distant from what we know of them in Persian, but that is another story for another time. *Nargese Širāz* is different not only in shape from daffodils or other types of narcissi but also, more importantly, in scent, which is much stronger, so mesmerizing, so out of this world.

The first time I saw in Brooklyn narcissi similar to *nargese Širāz* was right after the first lifting of the strict quarantine of COVID-19. As we took a walk around the neighborhood, I spotted some in the flower boxes of a house. They were not on the public sidewalk but across the threshold of the private, but I could not resist smelling them, and, oh, I was on the verge of crying with joy, almost forgetting the dry stiffness and pain in my hipbones for lack of walking and exercise for many, many days. I walked a few steps past the flowers after first taking in their scent and then retraced my steps to smell them again, and it was in this unfortunate moment that I could not stop myself from picking one, hesitating, pausing, thinking over, smelling them again, telling myself that I had to continue with my walk but failing and eventually doing what I should not have done. I picked one, feeling exhilarated by the scent in my hand while also awful for what I had done, immediately walking away as fast as I could, like the bad kid that I was. Suddenly, I heard a woman's voice behind me, angrily calling out and scolding me, perhaps the owner or resident of the house in whose planters the flowers lived, who had apparently seen me through the window. I was followed by her curses so rightfully justified as I continued walking, repeating my apologies with shame, which did not do much to mollify the woman, whom I was afraid to turn back to look at. I felt irritated with myself for not having been able to curtail my desires, ruining the woman's joyful sunny day looking out the window to watch her flowers and the river of people resurrected from the solitude of their homes. And yet, later in the day, I kept

thinking about how, especially under such circumstances, she could have reacted differently and, if she had, what my own reaction would have been, and I imagined, if our places had been switched, how delighted I might have been to watch someone experience that mischievous moment in the first outing after the lockdown. But I also realized that the woman had a right to be mad at and frustrated with me. Who in their right mind would pick a flower from a flowerpot in the front yard right by the entrance to a ground-floor apartment with windows overlooking the street? Wasn't I actually breaking the law?

The time the narcissi made a thief out of me was not, however, the first time I found in the United States the flower closest in shape and scent to the *narges* of my memories and dreams. The first time ever I saw and smelled this type in the United States, it had come from the wilderness in the mountains of Colorado. In a small, regular drinking glass, at a friend's cottage in the mountains, there it sat, with none of the vanity of Narcissus, among other wildflowers the friend had picked on her walk earlier in the day.

Narges is yellow and orange, but, except for those few instances, the narcissi I've mainly found here are the white varieties, and those only in more recent years. If you are a Trader Joe's customer, as I am, you might have seen them in their season, in rectangular boxes, with a tag that calls them "Paper Whites." I remember the first time I spotted them a few years ago in one of the stores in downtown Brooklyn and smelled them. I could not believe my luck and got myself a box. When an Iranian friend saw them at my place later that night, she, too, couldn't believe it and the next day headed there to get herself some, texting me, disappointed, because they had run out. Most recently, a friend from my middle school years in Tehran, who now lives in Dallas, texted me (it was sometime in March, around the Persian New Year) to tell me I should head to the store and get them. This time I was the one left disappointed because I didn't find them there, thinking, well, perhaps they had them in Dallas but not in Denver, only to actually find them there a few days later



Figs. 9.1 and 9.2. Bundle of narges in my psychoanalyst's office in Tehran. Source: Mehdi Mohammadi.

when I had gone to buy another friend some flowers. I was so excited I got myself not one but two boxes.

At this point in my life, not only do all of my close friends know about my love of the flower, but also the algorithm-generated ads on social media have figured it out, as proven by an ad for “uncommon goods” on my Instagram that suggested a pair of drinking glasses painted with narcissi flowers. The ad informed me that they are the flowers of December, which was the first time I’ve heard this. Whether this is true or not is the responsibility of the company and its marketing ploy, which, of course, I bought into after several times of scrolling through and resisting, finally giving in and getting the glasses for myself, but both are unfortunately now broken and gone.

But let’s put algorithms aside and go back to my friends. There is a picture of me during one of my visits to Tehran, one of the last times I visited, which is yet another story I’ll leave for another time. In that picture, I’m wearing a long, red coat and, on my hair and around my neck, a colorful woolen scarf with dark, pinkish-red flowers, and I have a bundle of *narges* in my hand, holding it close to my face, smelling it. Looking at my face in the picture, I can feel—or maybe it is remembering, not feeling—the joy all over my body. And I remember exactly where my friend and I were, which neighborhood, which street, which corner; I don’t remember where we were headed. The flowers had just started to appear for the season, and my friend had gotten me a bundle before picking me up. From then on, every season, whenever she buys herself *narges* and arranges them in vases, she sends me a picture or tags me on her Instagram, knowing how much I miss them now that I cannot go back home. How I wish images could transport scent, too!

There are three more pictures I want to share with you here. The first two are images of a bundle of *narges* in a vase in my psychoanalyst’s office in Tehran, which he shared on his Instagram account (figs. 9.1 and 9.2). I have been in analysis with him for more than seven years, many of them from far away and thanks to the powers of Facetime, Google Meet, and other applications, depending on what works best in Iran during internet

limitations. In a recent session, I was sitting in my living room in Denver as we talked about the notable dates of my analysis's trajectory — when I first went to meet him in Tehran, when I had my first session online, when I transitioned from one session per week to two and then to four — because I wanted to mark and acknowledge these dates. However, I could not remember them, and this raised feelings of frustration; so he went back to his calendar and his notes, pulling them out one after the other, the exact dates marking my journey with him and with myself. I wrote these dates down with a black pencil on the blank page at the end of one of the books on the side table, and the book was none other than my copy of *Journal of Ordinary Grief* by Mahmoud Darwish, which felt eerily meaningful for this marking, and so then I had to talk about Darwish and what he meant to me, his words, his worlds, weaving in and out of mine. Anyway, I am digressing. I did not intend to talk about that session but rather about the session after I saw that image of the flowers on my analyst's social media. I spoke to him about how I felt seeing the narcissi in his office, the couch and the frames on the wall in the background, about the caption he had written, which at this point I do not remember, and I broke down and cried, the pain of longing being too heavy to bear. He noted that he did not remember my having spoken about narcissus before, yet I felt I must have. How could I not? He seemed distraught by how his picture had affected me. That session, which had really started even before its hour with my seeing those images, was beautiful, a time of intimacy and going deeper with him and with myself and with the two of us in that space.

It was, however, the third image he uploaded on his Instagram the day following our session that shifted something about the possibilities of love in psychoanalysis and in the world beyond. The image was of a big bundle of *narges* on his car's passenger seat (fig. 9.3), and the caption read something along the lines of "What was once for you is now for me too," or that's how I remember it anyway. I was certain that I took a screenshot or saved that post, but I have been scrolling through my saved posts and screenshots for a while now, and I can't find it, which I



Fig. 9.3. A big bundle of *narges* on my psychoanalyst's car's passenger seat. Source: Mehdi Mohammadi..

think might be a sign — one pushing me to let go of this urge, this need, for documentation, one pushing me to sit with the discomfort of living and losing, reminding me that experiencing something in its moment and remembering it in my body might be all that is needed.

But, you know, here is the last picture after all, not found in my own phone archives but sent to me by my analyst when I told him about my desire that the photograph he took be included and shared with you.

You know, my dear reader, I am getting sentimental now and might be beginning to bore you with my meandering associations while meditating on my beloved flower *narges*, and I do believe these personal images are perfect to end on. But I cannot honestly finish this note of mine on the flower *narges* without

naming and paying tribute to Narges Mohammadi نرگس محمدی, Iranian writer and human rights activist, a woman who has been a source of inspiration for me and many women of my country with her long years of resistance against tyranny, a woman I can write about for pages and pages but won't; that will be another piece for another time. So, I want to end instead by dedicating this piece to her by quoting part of a message she sent from the notorious Evin Prison in Tehran to Pen America upon being awarded the Barbey Freedom to Write Award in 2023: "Let us prove the magic of global unity against authorities bestowed with power and greed. There are many ways to achieve this. Our strength comes from our pens, solidarity, and independent civil institutions' continuity and proliferation. So, let's stand up and take a step forward."¹²

12 PEN America, "Iranian Writer Narges Mohammadi Sends Message from Behind Bars," *YouTube*, May 23, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUfooXbz4Kk>.

Bibliography

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Life of the Mind*. Mariner Books Classics, 1981.
- Diaz, Natalie. "Postcolonial Love Poem: Part One." Interview with David Naimon. *Between the Covers*, July 14, 2023. <https://milkweed.org/between-the-covers/natalie-diaz-postcolonial-love-poem-part-one>.
- Freud, Sigmund. "On Narcissism." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 14: *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works (1914-1916)*, edited and translated by James Strachey with Anna Freud. Hogarth Press, 1957.
- "On Narcissism, 1914, by Sigmund Freud." *SigmundFreud.net*, July 14, 2023. <https://www.sigmundfreud.net/on-narcissism.jsp>.
- PEN America. "Iranian Writer Narges Mohammadi Sends Message from Behind Bars." *YouTube*, May 23, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUfooXbz4Kk>.

Writing the Impossible

Selah Saterstrom¹

Writing the impossible is the name of a writing strategy I developed out of desperation while trying to write a novel. The first section of this chapter, “Procedure,” is the story of how that strategy came to be, concluding with instructions for how to complete the exercise along with a demonstrative example. The second section, “Writing the Impossible,” is the end result of the aforementioned demonstrative example.

I. Procedure

Designing creative writing strategies has been a part of my pedagogical practice since the first class I taught in a juvenile jail diversion program in rural North Carolina more than twenty-five years ago.

After my first class, I sat in my duct-taped-together Volvo and cried: I had actually managed to teach my very first creative writing class and, having seen the writing strategy I designed in action, I felt an oracular glimmer of the importance teaching

¹ This essay is indebted to Kelly Corbin, Mindy Gates, Carin Wohadlo, Eric Baus, HR Hegnauer, Teresa Carmody, and Julia Cohen.

would come to hold in my life. I was also crying because I had received a voicemail while I was in the classroom. My mother. Six months before she had been on life support, showing no signs of improvement.

Many times my mother tried to die while living. It was hard for her to be in this world. I remember being five, the age my daughter is now, running my fingers over the knotty scars encircling her wrists, a botched job thanks to a drunk country doctor. These were her “scar bracelets,” after her second suicide attempt as a young teenager. There were three of them.

In an effort to practice the apocalypse as a way to stave it off, I tried to imagine her death in my second novel.

In the novel, only two people attend the dead mother’s funeral — the main character and her sister. During the burial scene, the main character smokes cigarettes and is wearing a “Metallica Ride the Lightning” T-shirt. When my real mother finally did die, a lot of people came to her funeral. I wore a blue and black dress with boots, a combination that was probably too sexy for a funeral. My sister and I got fake eyelashes and blowouts at the salon inside the Walmart on the way to the service because we didn’t want our cousins saying we didn’t look good.

Her official cause of death was listed as heart failure. Eight weeks later, over Mother’s Day weekend, my sister told me that the toxicology screen returned, complicating the coroner’s swift interpretation. My mother had been sober a long time, except for the weekend she died. The coroner said that she was in a blackout state when she made the final choices that ended her life, which involved taking handfuls of pills, by the report’s estimations.

But before I wrote the book — which failed to prevent my mother’s actual death — the book existed as a thought and a sensation, a white-hot scratch across tender skin. Within the sensation — the voice of a teenaged girl who had lost control of her body. But whose body? My mother’s teenaged body? My body? All the bodies in all directions? If this was a thought suggesting it wanted to become a book, I did not want to have it. Nevertheless, this was the visitation that set up shop in the mid-

dle of my life, a willing collaborator; despite what I hoped or thought I might be writing, this is what I was writing. Writing is a crossroads art; it offers countless opportunities to practice nonattachment so that we might listen instead.

Thoughts about the teenage girl became acute as the months passed. I was fortunate to attend an artist colony that provided radical support, a big improvement in my circumstances. It was now time to get to work, and though I admitted that I was writing *that book*, I didn't know how to tell the story of a disassociated teenage girl trying to get back into her body.

I looked to my self-selected teachers, of whom I've had the best. I opened the books of Rebecca Brown, Laird Hunt, Joan Fiset, Robert Glück, and Akilah Oliver. How did they write their astonishing books? One thing these writers have in common is that they are attuned to detail. Their details ally with the difficulty within their content, generating a synergy that casts a nuanced atmosphere inside of which a seemingly impossible story could be told.

I thought of how my students—rather than trusting the details that populated their stories—tended to lean into over-narration or speculation, half-formed exegesis squirming in the corridors of the text. I thought about how I did this, too.

We pitch relevance through all the gestures; we want the reader to know why something is important. Meanwhile, our details are often extremely capable of delivering the emotional gravity of a scene and can accomplish the labor of moving a story forward. Our details are poignant—they are absurd, endearing, horrifying. They interrupt the organized scene, the smooth underplane of the page, reorienting content toward the uncanny and wild resonances that shimmer beneath all the surfaces in a scene. Details can be the subversive altar call to the messy and gorgeous experience of getting to be here.

Our details are legitimate citational sources. In my case, they genuflect to affect theory, feminist and queer autotheory, somatic poetics, and divinatory poetics, with a deep bow to the new narrative movement.

It felt impossible to write the novel about the teenage girl, so I made a list of ten details I associated with her voice. The details emerged from all over the place. I didn't overthink it. I tried to follow what felt like urgency.

After I had my list of ten details, I wrote a portrait of each of these details, which resulted in ten vignettes. When I was done with that list of details, I repeated the process again and again, slightly adjusting its focus each time.

The resulting vignettes ended up forming the first seventy pages of my second novel, and I named the strategy "writing the impossible."

I do this exercise four to six times a year. It has become part of my standard practices as a writer. For me, it provides a way to surrender what I know (or think I know) about a story while collaborating with something other than myself (i.e., the details) as a way to invite potential meanings in.

I have found that the vignettes born of this strategy hold an energetic imprint of the overwhelming topic that often feels impossible to write. Such vignettes can potentially hold a signal, attuned, and offer an anchor in the flux so that we might enter into a story and begin.

At times, when we get our minds out of the way and allow our details to do their work within the field of the page, the story will, at last, arrive as itself. Our details can be portals through which we might enter the nuanced depths of our content.

Below are the instructions to writing the impossible. When composing my example to accompany the exercise, I asked myself what I felt drawn to write about but also what felt overwhelming to approach.

I thought about my grandfather's and stepfather's suicides and my mother's complicated, self-involved death. I thought about my love and terror at getting to be here, and I thought about writing. I pulled out a piece of paper. From within this messy swamp, I made a list of ten details and began.

Over the past twenty years, I have shared this strategy with people in many different settings, all over the world. Take it, I tell them, change and improve it. See what happens.

Writing the Impossible: A Creative Writing Strategy

Directions

Pick your “impossible” topic. Your topic should be something you feel drawn to write about but don’t know how to approach, enter, or begin. Such topics tend to induce a sense of overwhelm. If the topic that emerges is too traumatic to work with, thank it, ask it to step aside for the time being, and invite another topic that you can work with to step forward.

Example

Topic: My mother’s death

Identify one primary emotion and one primary concept that animate your chosen topic. Next, you’ll choose *one* of these to focus on.

Example

Emotion: Grief

Concept: Writing the impossible

I’m going to focus on the concept writing the impossible. Circle/bold/underline this word or phrase, and then set it aside for now. We’ll return to it later.

Now you will make the first of several lists. Remember your “impossible” topic? On a new page (or scrolling down to allow space), write down your original topic. Underline it.

Example

Topic: Mother’s death

Imagine your topic as an umbrella. You are going to allow details to collect beneath its shelter. Beneath your underlined topic, number your page 1 to 5.

You will now list details that you associate with your topic. These details may relate to stories, impressions, memories, and so on. They do not have to be written out in complete sentences. Fragments work great. The goal is to give the incoming details a place to land.

Example

Mother's death

1. *She was smoking a cigarette at the time of her death.*
2. Her fridge was a mess.
3. It was hell-hot and no AC.
4. There was a medical bill and a lone sock on her kitchen table.
5. The coroner asked my sister for her phone number when she bumped into him later at the grocery store.

Tune into **one detail** from your list that holds a resonance or charge for you. (You don't even need to know why it does. Let your gut take the wheel).

Example

Mother's death

1. *She was smoking a cigarette at the time of her death.*
2. Her fridge was a mess.
3. It was hell-hot and no AC.
4. There was a medical bill and a lone sock on her kitchen table.
5. The coroner asked my sister for her phone number when she bumped into him later at the grocery.

Now you will make a new list. On a new page (or scrolling down on your current page, allowing space), write down your selected detail. Underline it. Beneath your underlined detail, number your page 1 to 5. You will now list details that you associate with *this* detail. Again, these may relate to stories, impressions, memories, and so on. These details do not have to be written out in complete sentences.

Example

She was smoking a cigarette at the time of her death.

1. The entire cigarette burned down to the filter, one unbroken ash.
2. Someone moved the ashtray, causing the single ash in the shape of where a cigarette used to be to break, and this made me angry.

3. The ashtray was by her daily devotional (my mother thought of God as a beloved, and her mother thought of God as a boyfriend and also a father).
4. Her hair smelled like wet smoke.
5. The cigarette came from a new carton, and it was the first pack of the carton, which my sister and I split between us.

Tune into **one detail** from *this list* that holds a resonance or charge.

Example

She was smoking a cigarette at the time of her death.

1. The entire cigarette burned down to the filter, one unbroken ash.
2. Someone moved the ashtray, causing the single ash in the shape of where a cigarette used to be, to break, and this made me angry.
3. *The ashtray was by her daily devotional (my mother thought of God as a beloved and her mother thought of God as a boyfriend and also a father).*
4. Her hair smelled like wet smoke.
5. The cigarette came from a new carton and it was the first pack of the carton, which my sister and I split between us.

Now, make a new list. On a new page (or scrolling down on your current page, allowing space), write your selected detail. Underline it. Beneath your underlined detail, number your page 1 to 5. You will now list details that you associate with this detail.

Example

The ashtray was by her daily devotional (my mother thought of God as a beloved and her mother thought of God as a boyfriend and also a father).

1. The time my mother disappeared in the dump for hours, and when she returned said she'd had an encounter with God (said she couldn't describe it, but she may have had sex with God).

2. The “nightgown advice” my grandmother gave me on my wedding night
3. My mother loved to pour her coffee, light a Salem 100, and open her AA book right as the sun was rising.
4. My mother gave me an early English translation of Rumi and a copy of *Joan of Arc: A Biography* when I turned twelve.
5. My mother loved her meditation practice.

Tune into **one detail** from this list that holds a resonance or charge.

The ashtray was by her daily devotional, my mother thought of God as a beloved, and her mother thought of God as sometimes a boyfriend and also a father.

1. *The time my mother disappeared in the dump for hours, and when she returned said she'd had an encounter with God (said she couldn't describe it but that she may have had sex with God).*
2. The “nightgown advice” my grandmother gave me on my wedding night
3. My mother loved to pour her coffee, light a Salem 100, and open her AA book right as the sun was rising.
4. My mother gave me an early English translation of Rumi and a copy of *Joan of Arc: A Biography* when I turned twelve.
5. My mother loved her meditation practice.

On a new page (or scrolling down on your existing page, allowing space), write this detail at the top of your page. Underline it. Set your timer for ten minutes (adjust time as desired). You are going to allow a vignette to drop from this detail. Don't overthink it. Just write from the site of the detail.

Let the detail be the portal through which you enter the writing. Afterward, do a two-minute “gut-edit” — set your timer for two minutes and make quick micro-adjustments to the text you've just written. Remember the word or phrase (an emotion or a concept) that you circled, bolded, or underlined awhile back, at the beginning of this strategy?

Write your selection above the vignette you've just written. It will serve as a title or weird-compass for the time being.

Example

The time my mother disappeared in the dump for hours and when she returned said she'd had an encounter with God (said she couldn't describe it but that she may have had sex with God)
→ BECOMES → writing the impossible

Example

Writing the Impossible

My mother threw herself into the kudzu bowl of the dump, and God found her. God made love to her. "All the colors at once," she said. It frightened me to hear the story. "But," my mother said, "you must hear it."

II. Writing the Impossible

My mother threw herself into the kudzu bowl of the dump and God found her. God made love to her. All the colors at once, she said. It frightened me to hear the story. "But," my mother said, "you must hear it."

Kudzu is a simultaneously efficient and fecund rhizome. It spreads through runners that root at the nodes to form new plants. A hearty, verdant hysterical projection, it never ceases emerging from itself. Like Yahweh in the Old Testament, kudzu consumes, then assumes, every shape in its gluttonous pursuit to persist and be. If a twining weed-vine were to snake through this chapter, it would be kudzu. Kudzu weaves its thick death-basketry over everything in its path unless stopped, and nothing really stops it. Hack it back, it returns in volley. Hack it back, it returns with teeming urgency. Out of the cut, it doubles.

In Diane Hoots and Juanita Baldwin's *Kudzu: The Vine to Love or Hate*, I learn that roots can reach twenty feet underground and can weigh up to 500 pounds. I learn that kudzu grows at a rate of one foot per day, and mature vines grow to a

hundred feet. But I know, and others will tell you, it can grow beyond these markers in parts where it is established.²

When I was growing up, snakes multiplied, people had sex, cigarettes turned to ash, kids had adventures, and serial killers hid bodies — all beneath the kudzu's canopies. Don't get caught in the kudzu or quicksand, mothers would say. Where its lattice-work seemed solid enough to receive a foot, the green mouth was known to open and children were, in this way, lost to bayous. Killer kudzu growing over railroad tracks, pressed by locomotives, its bright innards greasing the rails, derailing trains. It smothers trees to death. It prevents seedlings from taking root because no sun can reach them.

Under its roofs, in its tunnels, in the yellow-green darkness-light, kudzu smells of soft grapes and decay, but outside? The blaring heat of day. Entryways into underworlds — in fields abandoned to it, in neighborhood gullies and brackish slews. The vine's flowers are purple and sexy. They make for an expensive love elixir. And for what ails you. Wash four cups of leaves, fresh, add a diced shallot. When the oil in the skillet snaps, drop it all in and stir without stopping until tender. Season to taste. An extract pulled from the root is so powerful that a single dose reduces the desire for drink and in a place where so many drunks drown in its silencing midst.

* * *

The old Dodge Charger would barrel down the road every morning, the *thump* smooth as we went from dirt to pavement. And every afternoon when we returned from the long day, until the first frost arrived, at the *thump*, there would be a thick arm of kudzu reaching across the road that had not been there in the morning.

But then every morning it would be gone.

Where did it go during the night?

2 Diane Hoots and Juanita Baldwin, *Kudzu: The Vine to Love or Hate* (Suntop Press, 1996), 5.

It bothered me.

* * *

The therapist asked the small group of women what our motivation was for being writers and artists, since being one, it seemed to her, was so difficult. After all, there we were. When it came my turn, I didn't have anything to say.

The next morning, after the flurry of getting everyone out the door, the house was silent. Waiting for the tea to steep, I stared out the window at the house across the street, which was permanently decorated for Halloween. Four years before, out of complete silence and never having shown any holiday spirit, the neighbor zealously decorated her house and yard for Halloween. Listen, I said to the always-Halloween house, I'm not saying what I believe is correct or even a good idea. But I would say that my motivation for writing is rooted in the most fundamental and long-standing value that I hold, which is that I believe art is a pathway to God, and all that matters is pursuing God.

God includes the potential absence of God. Paradox, contradiction, opposites—God the joke book, a fake, or, like Mother Wasp midflight, God is eaten alive from the inside as her clutch hatches and, satiating in the liquid heat of Mother's guts, are born within her death; where there was God, now there is a swarm, and the swarm eradicates God, which is writing. A God infected with death, a God orgy-sick with life. Everything that writing is, God is. And both are potentially nothing. No thing—a plurality of intensities.

Inside stories I do not want to locate God. I do not want to pin God down. I pull the tarot card that says the lion wears a shroud of lambs. Some nights I walk around with God's name hanging out of my mouth. Art is a path to God, and God is where all desire finds its most radical terminus—the double pitch reverberation in black velvet vases filled with inky milk into which I put my ruined fingers.

So writing is a way to be with this belief. It permits it.

* * *

For several years when I was a kid, we lived in a singlewide mobile home located on the edge of an unofficial dump within a swath of territory known as the Plantation Trailer Park in an unincorporated community outside a small, rural town in Mississippi. After work, when there was work, and the day would cool, my stepfather, Charles, would crack open a beer, light a smoke, and sit on the stairs leading up to the trailer's screen door. He'd look into the kudzu bowl of the dump. Occasionally he'd get up and fiddle under the hood of the Dodge Charger, the drone of cicadas in surround sound.

Years later, during his funeral, my sister's once regionally famous breasts rang out, their pale tops gently quivering as the lower portions remained locked and loaded, AC/DC's "You Shook Me All Night Long" filling the cheap mauve sanctuary. The ringtone for her husband, Bill. Did we want McDonald's? Bill wanted to know. Yes, little Riley Ann would like French fries with sweet-and-sour dipping sauce and a strawberry milkshake. This funeral. With its slick and stained preacher we didn't know in a chapel smelling of mildew where exactly zero people showed up to honor the life of Charles "Charlie Boy" Schleet, suicide, with the exception of myself, my mother, my ex-husband, my sister, and my two-year old niece.

After the preacher's dramatic performance in which he referred to Charles as a gentle giant, causing my sister to snort, he asked for his money, services rendered, sweat beading his upper lip. I gave him twenty bucks. "I'll give you more later," I lied. Previously, the box of Charles's ashes had been sitting next to a dusty, fake flower arrangement on a plinth, but now the preacher, who had grown tired of us, was shoving the box into my hands. His sudden gesture caused me to stumble backward so that when I reached for the box in an awkward effort to correct, I squeezed the sides, which popped the top and released a discreet but potent puff of Charles onto the preacher's face, a silky coating covering his Aqua-Velva sheen, which he wiped

away with a handkerchief as if it were nothing, as if he'd done it so many times before.

After the funeral, my sister drove us to the beach. We walked into the Gulf of Mexico, knee deep, clothes and all, my niece bobbing on my sister's hip, and my mother said, "Let us perform a ceremony." The ceremony was to smoke a cigarette. I handed out cigarettes, and my sister produced a lighter.

"This is for you, Charles," Mama said.

"Is this really the ceremony?" I asked. My sister rolled her eyes.

When we were done, my mother pulled out a Ziploc of Charles's ashes recently collected from the larger bag with the aid of a spoon my niece had at some point abandoned in my sister's car. She sent the baggie around, and we each got a small handful. "Jesus Christ," someone said. It may have been me.

"Now," my mother continued, "on the count of three we'll all throw Charles into the Gulf. One. Two. Three."

The ashes arced in a fine web through which I glimpsed the orange and pink late-afternoon sky reflected in the water's surface. Then, a mean wind reared back, hitting us in the face. The tiny shards slapped and stung. My sister began gagging as if trying to spit out the ashes I assumed had slammed into her mouth. My mother breathed in, smiled, and put her head back. Honk honk. It was Bill. Pulled up on the curb by the beach road. "YASSS!" my toddler niece said. "I LOVE French fries!"

* * *

I quit smoking when my wife became pregnant. I was overdue to quit — out of respect for my partner and the family we were creating, because it was a deadly addiction, because it connected me to flood-drenched piles of ripped-out carpet soaking in transgenerational sadness. My smoking had been a holdout. Growing up, breathing in cigarette smoke hijacked the smell of decay with immediacy. It articulated breath. It drew a circle around it with a black marker. Netted by death, we were alive. From elsewhere in this chapter, my dead stepfather, Charles,

lights a Doral Full Flavor, leans in with his signature wink, and says, “County dump magic is who we are, babe.”

Charles smoked Doral Full Flavors, a cheap brand. Toward the end, he smoked whatever was cheaper than Dorals. I feel confident in saying that the last thing he did before he shot himself was smoke a cigarette. On the coffee table in front of the couch where he died, there was an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts. The surface of the coffee table was sticky from illness and old beer. You could see the swashy shape of the grime upon the table because a thin coating of cigarette ash collected on top of it, giving it visibility. I sat on that stinking couch for a long time after they took his body away. I sat where he died and stared at the ashtray. It was one of the last places his life force had been. I was trying to find the seam. It was the seam that was given.

It was decided I would be the caretaker of the remainder of Charles’s ashes. Once back in Denver, 1,200 miles away, I put the cardboard box on a chair in my study, where it immediately became obscured by piles of stuff — clothes hastily pulled out of a suitcase, all manner of papers, contents of purses and teaching bags. It wasn’t my long-term plan to leave the box in the chair, but I also didn’t know where to put it. A disassociated month passed.

In the dream I was doing something that happened in real life: I was cleaning out his condemned house, a trailer-house hybrid affair that he inherited from his parents and where he and my mother lived for years.

In the dream version, I’m standing on a pile of books so I can reach the top shelf of the hall closet, which sits at the end of the hallway packed with mismatched sheets, towels, and mouse shit. No matter how much I pull out, there is more. I’m pulling stuff out and cramming it into an industrial-size garbage bag when Charles, suddenly, is standing next to me.

“What the hell is going on?” he asks.

“Charles,” I say, “you are dead.”

He laughs, but then the confusion on his face twists and deepens. This is often the way with suicide ghosts — at first,

they don't realize they are dead or don't recall the manner of their death. How lonely, me and Charles. Staring into the stuffed throat of the hall closet like it would say something back. The sound of the needle dropping into the static groove. *I don't like you, but I love you, seems that I'm always thinking of you, oh, oh, oh, you treat me badly, I love you madly, you really got a hold on me.*³

I jolted upright, awake. It was 4:02 in the morning. I felt nauseated. I walked through my office to get to the kitchen for a glass of water, but as I entered my office, sitting in my office chair was Charles. He was just sitting there. After two or three seconds, he faded out like a mercurial wave good-bye.

The next day between dissertation and committee meetings, I realized Charles had appeared in the chair where I had abandoned his box of ashes, now obscured by piles of stuff. I texted my friend Eric. Would he help me? He would. That weekend we took Charles's ashes to the large park within walking distance of our apartments. The eighty-acre park, a graveyard as recently as the late nineteenth century, and a graveyard still because many graves were never relocated, was now a place enjoyed by day for its pet-friendly walking trails and large playground, and by night for its gay cruising opportunities. Eric and I found a small stand of trees with a view of the entire park.

"This seems like a nice spot," I said.

"It does," Eric agreed.

We buried the bulk of Charles's ashes there. I saved some to be placed on my ancestor altar. They sit in a plastic baggie inside his toddler cup, which bears his name, etched in cursive. He sits next to my mother's mother's tooth, framed in a hand-shaped shadow box.

* * *

3 "You Really Got a Hold on Me" was written by Smokey Robinson and originally performed by Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. Smokey Robinson, "You Really Got a Hold on Me," recorded October 1962, Tamla Label, 1962, vinyl LP.

Other than us, Charles didn't have much family — an estranged sister, a son in prison, and everyone else was dead. I don't think anyone would have considered Charles a "good guy" — that broad category used to house many sorts of men, including unexceptional ones. He could, in fact, be a real bad guy. Still, it bothered me that not one goddamned person, other than the five of us, attended his funeral.

While in a blackout, Charles once beat my mother such that when taken to the county hospital, she lied and said she'd been in a car wreck. No one called the Sheriff's Department or asked questions. "Well, all right then," I can hear the exhausted nurse saying, "let's get you in the back." When sober, Charles was dorky, like an overgrown six-foot-seven sweet, slow-moving kid. When he'd get blackout drunk and reemerge from his episodes, he couldn't believe the things he'd done.

"Naw," he'd say, "naw."

He shot himself while my mother was visiting my sister, three hours away. I was astonished to learn that he did so while on the phone with my mother. "Did you hear the gunshot?" I asked her. Her response was to say my name, presumably as an admonishment for ignorance or bad manners, or a combination of both. What I understood in that moment was that she had tucked the gunshot sound from his body into her body. It is true that it was terrible, but still, it had been an intimate exchange between partners. We never spoke of it again. It was the seam that was given.

Even though she doesn't know that I'm writing this essay, my sister brings up this terrible phone call for the second time in our lives. "I was in the room with mom," she says, an ache the shape of an invisible candle flame wavering in the middle of her voice. Something I had forgotten — she absorbed the shock of the blast by proxy.

* * *

In order to die, my grandfather used a shotgun, and Charles, a handgun. Breaking into the house after Charles's death, I said it

wouldn't be as bad as the time with my grandfather. That had been a hard scene. "Handguns can't do the same sort of visceral damage," I said as if I knew. An hour later while standing in the living room in 110-degree heat, holding a bottle of uncapped bleach, wearing flip flops, and eyeing a cheap Confederate flag stapled to the wood-paneled wall obliterated by death, I was surprised to be wrong. Of course, the conditions of the two scenes were different, but being wrong about the one thing I thought I knew felt like the knockout punch that ended the match. A theme regarding Charles's death — how I misjudged my capacity, which nonetheless was wrecked into expansion.

Before he died, Charles was festering in untreated mouth cancer. It deformed his face. Sheets of spit tinted pink from blood would leak onto his old Hanes undershirts. He still smoked cigarettes.

He'd been on a waitlist for months to be seen at the VA, two and half hours away, and with no car. Meanwhile, I was across the country. Once, during a break while teaching a contemporary hermeneutics graduate class, I cried into the phone to a lady who worked at the VA.

"He needs help now, goddamn," I said. "He is dying."

"Oh, honey," the woman on the other end replied, "I know that's right."

* * *

With a sense of soured indignity, again I say to my wife: *Not one person!* Every time I repeat this fact, my wife nods with compassion. Of course, Charles's funeral was attended — I was there. My mother was there. The preacher was there. My sister was there, as were my niece and ex-husband. We were there. A statement that sounds like a witness testifying to having survived a relationship and that works in this context, too.

All of it was lonely, the kind that can get low down. To be without a companion: at root, the very definition of lonely. Which is how suicides were, for hundreds of years, treated post-humously — bodies cast out from the bodies of others.

Fifteen years after Charles's death, I tell my daughter stories about him. What she knows is that he played a guitar and loved the old Dodge Charger. Whenever we pass a vintage car, no matter what it is, my daughter points and says his name.

For a long time, it bothered me. Every morning the smooth *thump* as we went from dirt to pavement. Where did the kudzu go during the night? It slid into the story through the crease where the book cracks on its spine.

I pull up on the property for the first time in many years. It was something I wanted to do and also dreaded. Shortly after his death, I heard the place had been burned to the ground, a controlled burn, the county's solution to the condemned and abandoned building becoming another meth lab. Looking at the land, I saw no trace of a burned-down house, just a broken mailbox stripped of its numbers by the turnoff with overgrown weeds obscuring it. Wherever there was something, now there was kudzu.⁴

* * *

What I'm noticing while writing this is that I am unable to edit it according to well-cultivated tendencies.

"What is your editing metaphor?" I have asked students many times. We also talk about allowing our metaphors to change as our bodies and lives become disrupted by joys and terrors.

When younger, under the influence of David Sylvester's interviews with painter Francis Bacon, I believed that the cut was the most generative approach to the field of writing—it was something akin to the fresh shock of interrupting my own intentions—the cut as an editorial position and as a divinatory method as cuts generate new ley lines of potential meaning,

4 This line, "Where ever there was something, now there was kudzu," is a riff on a line from a love letter written by the French Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot to his lover Sophie Volland. "Where ever there is nothing," he wrote to Sophie, "read that I love you." His letters to Sophie are considered vital to understanding his collected philosophical writings, though none of Sophie's letters to Diderot were saved.

drift, or shape.⁵ At any rate, that method no longer works. Nothing in me wants to cut the bodies in these stories.

I don't think that kudzu is an alternative metaphor, paradigm, or solution.

But I also notice that I can't stop thinking about it.

* * *

My grandfather was an oil painter, and painting was a path to God. It was his obsession.

My grandparents lived in an antebellum farmhouse at the end of a dirt road — Cemetery Road, aptly named for the large 1822 cemetery nearby. The Harpe brothers (the earliest documented serial killers in the United States) were associated with this property, as was Jean Lafitte. Bordering the property, there were rolling pastures leading to bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River. The property also adjoined the infamous bayou, the Devil's Punchbowl, which was the site of a post-Civil War atrocity wherein a concentration camp was established in its kudzu depths, and there 20,000 freed slaves died. The Devil's Punchbowl is also known for its wild peach groves, but no locals eat the fruit. In the early 1980s, a puffy red-faced police officer came to my grade school and said not to go in it because it was 100 percent a devil-worshiping hell hole, which is one way for a dominant white culture to pathologize the site of an atrocity it created and wished to continue controlling.

Despite the law saying it was a Satanic place, one day Jesus walked out of the Devil's Punchbowl and right into my grandparents' house. He rounded the corner into the room where my grandfather sat slumped.

"Paint me," Jesus said.

My grandfather was unable to do much. He certainly couldn't paint. He had barely survived a debilitating stroke.

"I can't," he mumbled. The shame he felt in that moment!

5 Regarding the fresh cut as both an editorial and divinatory method, see David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (Thames & Hudson, 2016).

"Paint me," Jesus said again, "and I will help you." Then Jesus turned around and left the way he had entered.

My grandfather pulled his stroke-impaired body down the foxtrot hallway where the rotary phone lived for special occasions, and, though it took a long time and was grueling, he rang my Aunt Penny, who came over straight away. Once there, she tied each of his arms to a yardstick, securing the yardsticks with thick twine. She then duct-taped paintbrushes to each arm. She positioned herself behind him, helping hold up his body while he dramatically moved his arms in relation to a canvas nailed to the wall that in short order revealed a portrait of Jesus. In the painting, Jesus's eyes follow you no matter where you walk in the room in which it hangs. Jesus's eyes are a stormy, oscillating gray.

In time, the Jesus story became the most famous story in the family. Because after he did as Jesus commanded, my grandfather was healed. He went back into his studio and painted for years to come. Word of the painting spread, and it would, at times, make extended visits throughout the county, hanging in severely haunted houses and other hopeless places.

My grandfather first told me the story of how the painting came to be when I was six years old. It frightened me to hear the story, but he said, "You must hear it."

* * *

This was not the first time my grandfather had been spared by the divine. Years before the Jesus story, he was declared dead on an operating table during heart surgery. He floated out of his body and into a tunnel of light that felt wonderful, but then a voice told him that it was not yet his time, and he was sucked back into his body, which, he said, was an unpleasant experience that he wouldn't wish on his worst enemy. Afterward, he became obsessed with all of the Dr. Moody *Life after Life* books.⁶

6 *Life after Life* was the first book in a series written by psychiatrist Dr. Raymond Moody in 1975, in which Moody interviews 150 subjects who had

He retired from law practice, fifteen years of which he served as a judge, and withdrew from public life to devote himself to private contemplation, spiritual study, and painting.

* * *

This is the story of the last question my grandfather asked me during our final exchange not long before he went into the backyard and committed suicide.

I was twelve. It was a hot day, the humidity outweighing the air, and my grandfather stood up from the beat-up leather chair in fine spirits.

"I have asked your grandmother to prepare a pie," he said.

He ambled toward the door, which led to the kitchen, which led to the backyard. But then he paused and turned to look at me.

"Have you been stealing my cigarettes?" he asked.

"No," I lied.

"You know," he said, with a twinkle in his eye, "the deepest pits of hell are reserved for liars and for people who take their own lives."

"Yes, sir," I said in an exaggerated tone, saluting him.

We both knew I had been stealing his cigarettes for quite some time and enjoying them in his very presence while we discussed his translation of the Gospel of John from the Greek. He looked at me and smiled. And he turned, opened the door, and went through.

* * *

Marzio Barbagli writes in his animated and exhaustive study of the history of suicide, *Farewell to the World*, "Women and men who lived in Europe [during the fourteenth through nineteenth

near-death experiences. Moody's noncritical approach has been criticized, but it was the first book of its kind and has been widely translated, becoming an international bestseller, more than 13 million copies.

centuries] knew full well that suicide was a heinous sin and the greatest crime that could be committed, and the sight of the retributions in the streets and squares served to remind them that it was punished by the civil and religious authorities with extraordinary severity.”⁷

Barbagli documents in detail that during this time throughout many parts of Europe, the corpses of suicides were imprisoned for the crime of self-murder, no matter what their state of decomposition was. The corpses were put on trial, in an actual court of law, complete with attending prosecutors and magistrates, and tried for murder, where the family of the deceased would be questioned under oath. A judgment would be handed down, and, in the case of suicides, it was always guilty, after which time the condemned corpse was sentenced to die again. The corpses were sometimes strangled by citizens, tied to a horse and dragged through the streets, or, very frequently, hanged. “But the worst threat,” Barbagli writes, “was the catastrophic consequences [...] for their loved ones [...] The latter would experience shame, dejection and despair owing to the ... humiliations.”⁸

The process of dehumanizing and degrading individuals who committed suicide did not end with posthumous bodily violence. The suicide’s assets, great or small, would be ceded to the church or state, often leaving families destitute. Additionally, the individuals who committed suicide weren’t the only ones legally condemned through the act. For example, in parts of Scotland, it was believed that if a pregnant woman passed over the grave of a suicide, her child would also commit suicide, making her an accessory to the crime.

As far as the ruling class was concerned, there were ample reasons to rebuke suicide. The suicides of exploited workers, soldiers, indentured servants, and slaves decreased the holdings of the wealthy. Meanwhile, the church pointed to the sixth com-

7 Marzio Barbagli, *Farewell to the World: A History of Suicide*, trans. Lucinda Byatt (Polity, 2015), 70.

8 Ibid.

mandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” but it got tricky quick, as the theological trajectory of many philosophers and church fathers reveal, including Augustine, Donne, Montesquieu, Montaigne, to name a few — after all, what about all those virgin martyrs? What about Jesus? He elected to die, did he not? *Did he not?* — a question my grandfather loved to ask his family, and even now, he lights a cigarette, leans in, and reminds us to “consider Borges, who wrote, ‘Imagine . . . a god who fabricates the universe in order to fabricate his scaffold.’”⁹

In the not-so-distant past, people who committed suicide were not removed from the home through doorways. Tunnels were dug or corpses were flung from windows and roofs. Suicide bodies were buried in the wilderness in unmarked graves or submerged in swamps or were dumped and staked at the crossroads or were buried in public places and marked with a stone so others could piss on their graves or were buried under the gallows with the hangman or were left hanging until they rotted and when the rope would break, the corpse was left until it was a skeleton where it would eventually become a part of things.

* * *

In addition to seeing Jesus, my grandfather saw Death, who looked like the popular renderings made famous by Ingmar Bergman, or so said my grandfather.

In one such instance, my grandfather was asleep when a dream about my mother woke him. At the time, my mother was a newborn sleeping in an adjoining nursery. Though it was dark, he could see Death leering over her crib. My grandfather leapt from bed, entered the nursery, and had a physical fight

9 I have searched for the Borges quotation to which my grandfather refers and have been unable to find it. A Google search suggests that the line comes from a Borges story titled “The Writing of God,” but the line does not appear in that story — at least, not as my grandfather stated it.

with Death — he had been a prize-winning boxer in the navy — finally wrestling my mother from Death's cold, bony grip.

My friend Eric, contemplating drone music, writes, "Rather than mapping these genres as overlapping entirely, I like to think of [...] unwieldy correspondents exerting invisible gravities on one another's orbits."¹⁰

When my grandfather punched into Death, he brought some back on his hands. He painted with those hands, he fed us.

* * *

The last ten years of his life my grandfather frequently encountered either Satan or Jesus. It is unclear which. The painting commission had become a series of holographic transmissions.

On these occasions, he would see Jesus and would fill with great and tender emotion, but that is precisely when Jesus's face would distort, horribly blooming into the face of Satan, who would taunt my grandfather until, finally, the sun rose. We would hear all about it over morning coffee. No adult — not his wife, his four adult children, their spouses, no one — ever questioned his experiences. It was a local understanding that he was a mystic. He did not, therefore, live by the same rules.

My grandfather, then, was a man of his own habits. Every day for lunch, with the assistance of his pocketknife, he ate a green apple with one slice of cheddar cheese. In the early evening, he ate one bowl of mush, served to him on a tray with a cloth napkin, while he sat in his old leather chair, where he lived and rarely slept. All was accompanied by a pot of strong coffee every few hours, two packs of cigarettes a day, a cigar, a pipe, and his medication, as needed, which was all the time. In the small town where we lived, for many years there was, more or less, one doctor, and he prescribed, more or less, two things — nitroglyc-

10 Eric Baus's meditation on drone music can be found in Baus, "How to Become a Hum: An Elongated Note on Drone," *Poetry Foundation*, 2019, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/featured-blogger/83319/how-to-become-a-hum-an-elongated-note-on-drone>.

erin pills in narrow amber vials for the weak of heart and pure codeine in the form of small white dots for everything else. He'd been prescribing both to my grandfather for decades.

* * *

During the writing of this chapter, my wife and I take my daughter to the Washington State Fair, a place of wonders. We view a 400-pound prize-winning pumpkin, and the air smells like funnel cake, which, breathed in continuously, makes us full of laughter. The funnel cake stands are sugared temples stationed at inflection points in the maze of mud, trash, and high pastels. I get a text from my sister. It is a picture of my twenty-four-year-old cousin. I text back: “?” My sister responds: “She killed herself last night.” My face falls down a flight of stairs. My daughter wants to know what's wrong. I don't know what to say. Jesus walked out of the Devil's Punchbowl, I say.

* * *

Listen, I'm not saying what I believe is correct or even a good idea — me to my therapist.

I am talking about the possible synergy that exists between suicide and grace because I am trying to write this chapter, and I am bothered that I believe writing is a way to pursue God just as other writers whom I love have also believed but who have, in some instances, committed suicide. This was what my grandfather believed about painting — if oil paint could, finally, yield God, a God who saved him so he could, at a later date, commit suicide. To be clear, I am not worried that I am going to commit suicide, but I am concerned that I may be working with a corrupt internal document.

She asks if I can think of an example of a writer who has a happy life while also practicing the belief that writing is a way to pursue God.

“No,” I say, “... I can't.”

"No one is happy," she finally says. "Believe me," she says. "The point," she continues, "is not to feel better — as if happiness were some goal or reward. The point is to be able to feel, period."

"Do you feel what you call God in the act of writing?" she asks.

"Yes," I say, "I do."

* * *

Despite the severe reactions to suicide that historians have meticulously catalogued in the archive of Western culture, there is one place where suicide has long been afforded a different response. That place is literature.

During times that enforced the most extreme penal codes regarding suicide, literature was a place where determining one's own ending was experienced as a more nuanced event. Suicide could, for example, be heroic or performed in the name of love.

For a long time, so many things bothered me. Where did everyone go during the night? They slid into the story through the crease where the book cracks on its spine.

* * *

The summer we entered our fifties, my friend Josie and I had both endured several exceedingly terrible months. Our friendship was a buoy in a lousy squall. We decided to do a thing we hadn't done in more than a decade, which was mushrooms. That night we laughed so much and so hard, it began to feel like something else. "We're purging!" Josie shouted, as if her voice was trying to get ahead of the laughter in hot pursuit — we had only just recovered from an extended hysterical episode centering on childhood recollections of Burt Reynolds. We were wrung out, gutted, and cleared by the spirit of laughter or by laughter spirits. After midnight, we decided to attempt rest. In Josie's guestroom, I slunk into bed with my wife and daughter. I was awake and feeling rather chatty. I confided to my wife that I feared I might have cracked or, worse, broken a rib from laugh-

ing. When I closed my eyes, I saw a grasshopper that told me aliens were real, which I felt compelled to share.

“Oh, my god,” my sober wife said.

I lay there quietly, tripping for hours.

An hour before dawn, I started to come down. My nervous system recalibrated, my body temperature began its journey toward reestablishing equilibrium, I began to yawn, I thought about food and a glass of water. Soon after, I became aware that someone was sitting on the floor by my side of the bed. All the air was sucked out of the room, and then an icy cool settled over my body, a blanket-tone. I worked up my courage and turned my head as quickly as I could to see who it was. It was Charles.

The first thing I felt was a wide, blank joy—I was happy to see him. I would describe his disposition as neutral. I’d characterize it as exceedingly sober. He got to the point and asked, as if genuinely confused, “Why do you keep me on your ancestor altar?”

It bothered me, I told him, that no one came to his funeral. How can someone move through the world and be witnessed so little? How can someone exist and die with hardly anyone noticing? He didn’t say anything. He had no emotional affect that I could discern. Bouncing off the flat plane of his face, I was then pitched into revelation: Few attended his funeral, but he is, nonetheless, deeply attended to. I attend to him. I project his memory through my art. This can be a form of love.

I wrote with Charles in mind while working on my third novel, *Slab*. It was the final scene I wrote for the book and is the linchpin scene of the novel’s structure—the book’s heart, or hinge, or hearth. The hearth, destroyed. And on those ruins, the story became itself. In my *Ideal Suggestions*, there is an essay dedicated to his memory, “Other People’s Stories.” That essay is about a time I was commissioned to write another essay but was only able to collect other people’s stories in which I tucked, like a secret, a story about Charles, which is really a story about how stories help us stay in our bodies during times of grief that shred our nervous systems.

In response to Charles's question, I told him that he lives in and through my writing. And we are a people who understand story magic. But, I added, and was loath to have to say so while speaking to the dead, the stories must include everything.

* * *

Considered by many scholars to be the harshest dimension of court rulings regarding suicide was the decree *damnatio memoriae*, the absolute erasure of all inscriptions bearing the name, details, or likeness of the deceased. Which brings us to writing. Even though we never left.

Erasers always leave a mark casting a net over absence — an absence that returns as the air in which the eventual sentence hangs like the constellation that it endlessly becomes with every reading.

Nothing in me wants to bring cuts to these bodies or to their stories. Yes, we've had quite enough of that — the ghost of Jean Beacourt agrees, a Frenchman and maimed soldier, who, after committing suicide in 1725, was cut up into tiny pieces and fed to dogs. Hack it back, it returns in volley. Hack it back, it returns with teeming urgency. Out of the cut, it doubles.

* * *

Here I'd like to write something like —

All that time ago, Charles wasn't asking why I kept him on the ancestor altar because *he* wanted to know.... He was asking so that I might realize my own answer.

Or —

In the end, my grandfather admitted he was addicted to opioids and apologized.

Or —

My mother didn't mean to end her life. It was an accident.

But the truth is: I don't know. Inside of these devastating absences, so violently rendered, there are god-shaped holes through which I look in order to consider writing the impossible. Writing is a crossroads art, offering countless opportunities to practice nonattachment so that we might listen instead.

"Listen," my mother said. "All the colors at once."

It frightened me to hear the story.

"But," my mother said, "you must hear it."

Bibliography

- Barbagli, Marzio. *Farewell to the World: A History of Suicide*. Translated by Lucinda Byatt. Polity Press, 2015.
- Baus, Eric. "How to Become a Hum: An Elongated Note on Drone." *Poetry Foundation*, 2019. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/featured-blogger/83319/how-to-become-a-hum-an-elongated-note-on-drone>.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Other Inquisitions, 1937–1952*. Translated by Ruth L.C. Simms. University of Texas Press, 1964.
- Hoots, Diane, and Juanitta Baldwin. *Kudzu: The Vine to Love or Hate*. Suntop Press, 1996.
- Moody, Raymond. *Life after Life: The Investigation of a Phenomenon — Survival of Bodily Death*. Mockingbird Books, 1975.
- Sylvester, David. *Interviews with Francis Bacon*. Thames & Hudson, 2016.

Yours/Mine/Ours: Practice-Led Autotheory, Collective Memory, and Historical Conflict

Cat Auburn

I feel a sense of dissonance when experiencing representations of the Anzac legend. This legend encapsulates Aotearoa New Zealand's collective memory of World War I, with representations ranging from live commemorative events through to public memorial sculptures and fictional retellings in film and television. Because of this sense of dissonance, I struggle to see myself reflected in these historic tales of conflict that have shaped my national identity, and I have been compelled to find a different approach to the forms of nostalgic reenactment and material languages of commemoration typical of Anzac mythology. In the winter of 2022, I initiated an autotheoretical, practice-led project called *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd*, a sculptural and filmic exploration that reimagines the Anzac legend by challenging commemorative practices. This artwork centers my own experiences with the Anzac legend through artistic practices such as threading beads, narrating, self-filming, swimming, and bronze casting — and through the inclusion of my material, haptic body. I embraced my autobiographic self,

a self that is not demographically visible within the Anzac legend, yet remains subject to its influence. My aim was to disrupt the prevailing heroic narrative of the Anzac legend, in a shift away from what Ursula K. Le Guin terms the “killer story.”¹ In *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, Le Guin critiques as limited and patriarchal the traditional narrative of the hero’s journey that predominates in Western literature. Instead, she proposes the “carrier bag” — an archetypal container used to gather, hold, and transport food and necessities — as a more suitable metaphor for storytelling, emphasizing cooperation, inclusivity, and the everyday realities of human experience rather than conquest and heroic individualism. Artistic autotheorizing with Le Guin has supported me to explore the stakes of questioning the centrality of military heroism within Aotearoa New Zealand’s collective identity, repositioning the sociopolitical history invoked in *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd* as part of a “continuing process”² rather than as a reinscription of a glorified military past within the present. *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd* is also an exploration of artistic, practice-led autotheory itself. First, it explores autotheory’s invitation to construct a plural self and the entanglement this presents when considering collectivizing narratives of national identity. Second, it presents the theorizing capabilities of artistic practice I discovered during my development of *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd*.

Self-Pluralization and Collective Memory

The relationship among myself, my art practice, and theory has historically felt fraught. This is partially because of the art-world context of Aotearoa New Zealand that I lived in as a young artist in the early 2000s and largely because of the influence of my early art education. First, positioning oneself as visible within one’s own art practice was not encouraged within these

1 Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (Ignota Books, 2019), 33.

2 Ibid., 35.

contexts.³ If the self appeared, it appeared ideally in an ironic capacity or as biography couched in the language of commodification. Second, I sensed theory's implicit professionalization. Theory can be employed, and often is, to legitimize the artist for commodification purposes.⁴ At its most extreme, theory is described as a "terroristic" force that artists engage with for fear of appearing unintelligent and uncommodifiable if they do not.⁵ My preexisting relationship with these inherited hierarchies and instrumentalizations of theory made it difficult for me to initiate an autotheoretical art practice. Developing an autotheoretical plural self through practice-led theorizing with the voices of others and my insistence on foregrounding practice-led engagement with theory (rather than using theory to contextualize artworks after the fact) have enabled me to diverge from this dynamic in order to relearn a more nuanced relationship among theory, self, and art practice.

A central tenet of autotheory is the embodied engagement of the autobiographic self with an extended or "plural self."⁶ Each project of autotheory is unique, whether artistic or literary. Yet common to them all is an effort to theorize with voices outside of the self, thus constructing a plural self and engaging in polyvocality.⁷ Polyvocality is the application of multiple voices as a narrative device and also a methodology grounded in anthropological and social justice-based practices.⁸ Autothe-

3 Gabrielle Amodeo, "Trauma and Autotheory in an Expanded Practice of Life Drawing," *Arts* 11, no. 5 (2022): 80.

4 Simon Critchley, quoted in Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (MIT Press, 2021), 108.

5 *Ibid.*, 108.

6 Carolyn Laubender establishes the idea of an autotheoretical plural self. See Laubender, "Speak for Your Self: Psychoanalysis, Autotheory, and The Plural Self," *The Arizona Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2020): 39–64.

7 *Ibid.*, 41.

8 *Oxford Reference*, s.v. "Polyvocality," <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199568758.001.0001/acref-9780199568758-e-2079>, and Rachel Weidinger, "Polyvocal Narrative Strategy: Turning Many Voices into Durable Change," *Narrative Initiative*, <https://narrativeinitiative.org/blog/polyvocal-narrative-strategy-turning-many-voices-into-durable-change/>.

oretical extensions of the self necessarily navigate complexities of narrative voice: Truth-telling is associated with an autobiographical first-person voice; third-person narration engenders perceptions of authority.⁹ Autotheoretical engagement occurs in various ways: citing experimentally, speaking *with*, curating *with*, and engaging in other forms of creative practice.¹⁰ Companions in autotheory can range from those we have never met who wield institutional authority to nonexperts and those known intimately.

One such companion within my artistic practice is Lance Corporal J.F. Rudd (1891–1982), Aotearoa New Zealander and Anzac World War I veteran. I first encountered Rudd through his memoir and found him to be poetic, funny, articulate, and a wonderful storyteller whom I admire.¹¹ He became an important voice from the past with whom I constructed a plural self during the development of my artwork *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd* (named so after the original source material).¹²

Rudd's memoir is testimony of his time in Gallipoli and then on horseback in the desert during the Sinai and Palestine campaign of World War I. It is his own individual tale of facing death, losing friends, and recalling the evidence for his belief in premonitions. However, when seen through the lens of

9 Robyn Wiegman, "Introduction: Autotheory Theory," *The Arizona Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2020): 2–5, and Mary Ann Doane and Pascal Bonitzer, quoted in Ming-Yuen S. Ma, *There Is No Soundtrack* (Manchester University Press, 2020), 28.

10 Katherine Baxter and Cat Auburn, "Introduction for Special Issue 'Autotheory in Contemporary Visual Arts Practice,'" *Arts* 12, no. 1 (2023): 11.

11 James Foster Rudd, *Manuscript Recollections of Service at Gallipoli and in Egypt/Palestine (1915–1916)* [1974], Liddle/ww1/anzac/nz/59/3, Liddle Collection, University of Leeds Library, Leeds, UK.

12 This artwork was developed within a larger body of doctoral research titled "I leave everything to you: An Autotheoretical, Practice-based Exploration of the Personal, Political and Social Stakes of Engaging with National Identity and Collective Memory." An earlier version of this chapter was published as part of a PhD thesis with Northumbria University in 2024; this research was supported by an AHRC-funded Northern Bridge Consortium studentship. With thanks to Creative New Zealand for additional financial support.

the Anzac legend, Rudd's memoir is part of a greater collective memory that upholds the ideals, values, and qualities of being an Aotearoa New Zealander.

The Anzac legend is held up as an origin story and cultural exemplar in both Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. This legend depicts a "baptism of fire,"¹³ the death of thousands of Australian and New Zealand men during the first landings in 1915 of the failed Gallipoli campaign. As a result, both former British dominions emerged with culturally distinct national identities. Contemporary society has absorbed idealized narratives about national and individual identities from this era, predominantly emphasizing white, male, British-oriented perspectives epitomized by character traits assigned to the Anzac soldiers themselves: the mischievous and resourceful Australian "larrikin," and the stoic, egalitarian "natural gentleman" of Aotearoa New Zealand.¹⁴ Despite challenges to these nation-building narratives, the enduring influence of the Anzac legend persists strongly in shaping contemporary ideas of national identity within mainstream consciousness in both countries.

In comparison to waning interest in the Anzac legend during the mid-twentieth century,¹⁵ contemporary Australian national identity is virtually synonymous with the "Anzac spirit." This term is used in Australia to describe a collective set of cultural values at the heart of Australian identity based in Anzac lore. Aotearoa New Zealand accommodates a more nuanced relationship with the mythology. The tone of Anzac Day—the national memorial day—differs in each country. For example,

13 "War Memorials. Anzac Day Ceremonies. Heathcote," *The Press* (Christchurch), April 27, 1925, 14.

14 Philippa Mein Smith, "The Tasman World," in *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, ed. Giselle Byrnes (Oxford University Press Australia & New Zealand, 2009), 315. These now-typical male stereotypes arose from the Anzac's reported performance during the Gallipoli campaign.

15 Joanna Kahn, "The Evolution of Anzac Day from 1915 until Today," *Australian Geographic*, April 24, 2017, <https://www.australiangeographic.com.au/blogs/on-this-day/2017/04/evolution-of-anzac-day/>, and Jenny Macleod, "The Fall and Rise of Anzac Day: 1965 and 1990 Compared," *War & Society* 20, no. 1 (2002): 149–68.

a sense of celebration in Australia is contrasted by a sense of commemoration and mourning in Aotearoa New Zealand.¹⁶ The relevance of Anzac Day, the public perception of the various players in the mythology, and the motifs and concerns of the legend have fluctuated and evolved over time. This evolution is often a reflection of the changing views and concerns of society.¹⁷ From the 1960s onward in Aotearoa New Zealand, Anzac Day was often used as a platform for social protest, such as the antinuclear politics of the 1980s.¹⁸

The Anzac legend is a complex settler narrative often appropriated to bolster far-right nationalist agendas, placing military history and white masculine identity at the forefront of national identity.¹⁹ This narrative tends to sideline women and obscure, erase, or co-opt Indigenous experiences.²⁰ Franchesca Walker illustrates the intricate co-option of Māori into the Anzac narrative, highlighting how ongoing territorial disputes with the British Crown led to differing rather than the widely assumed ubiquitous iwi (tribe) participation in World War I.²¹ The mem-

16 Philippa Mein Smith, "The 'NZ' in Anzac: Different Remembrance and Meaning," *First World War Studies* 7, no. 2 (2016): 1–19.

17 Macleod, "The Fall and Rise of Anzac Day," and Jeanine Graham, "Young New Zealanders and the Great War," *Paedagogica Historica* 44, no. 4 (2008): 429.

18 "Anzac Day," Manatū Taonga New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage, <https://mch.govt.nz/anzac-day/history>; Mein Smith, "The 'NZ' in Anzac," 202; and Macleod, "The Fall and Rise of Anzac Day," 157.

19 Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, eds., *What's Wrong with Anzac? The Militarisation of Australian History* (University of New South Wales Press, 2010), viii; Simran Pawar, "Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZACS) in World War One: The Making of National Identity and Erasure of Women and People of Color" (undergraduate thesis, University of Central Florida, 2020); and Mark McKenna and Stuart Ward, "It Was Really Moving, Mate': The Gallipoli Pilgrimage and Sentimental Nationalism in Australia," *Australian Historical Studies* 38, no. 129 (2007): 147.

20 Shanti Sumartojo, "Commemorative Atmospheres: Memorial Sites, Collective Events and the Experience of National Identity," *Transactions of Institute of British Geographers* 41, no. 4 (2016): 542.

21 Franchesca Walker, "'Descendants of a Warrior Race': The Maori Contingent, New Zealand Pioneer Battalion, and Martial Race Myth, 1914–19," *War & Society* 31, no. 1 (2012): 1–21.

ory of Aotearoa New Zealand's involvement in World War I remains prominent, in contrast to the marginalization of its colonial history, particularly the New Zealand Wars, which took place between 1845 and 1872 and which until recently have been largely omitted from national memory.²²

Additionally, the Anzac legend has become one framework through which national identity is understood in both nations as seemingly *unquestionable*. The personal and political stakes of interrogating stories and histories that problematize the Anzac legend are high because this questioning is seemingly at odds with the social demand for reverence. Those who dare to question the Anzac legacy run a spectrum of risks, from being labeled unpatriotic²³ and committing "treason"²⁴ to losing employment or being threatened with loss of citizenship.²⁵ Severe consequences such as these are directly the result of the enmeshed nation-building associations of the Anzac legend. National identity and values, especially in Australia, have been encoded with the rules of memorialization: unwavering respect

22 James Belich, "War," in *The Future of the Past: Themes in New Zealand History*, ed. Colin Davis and Peter Lineham (Massey University, 1991), 121–40, and Charlotte Macdonald, "The First World War and the Making of Colonial Memory," *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 33, no. 2 (2015): 17.

23 Australian Indigenous musician Ziggy Ramo faced public backlash and censorship for his song "April 25th." See Katie Cunningham, "Ziggy Ramo on Black Snow, Anzac Day and His Q+A Controversy: 'I was like, I've broken the Matrix!'" *The Guardian*, December 23, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/dec/24/ziggy-ramo-on-black-snow-anzac-day-and-his-qa-controversy-i-was-like-ive-broken-the-matrix/>.

24 Lake and Reynolds, *What's Wrong with Anzac?*, 23.

25 Australian Yassmin Abdel-Magied felt it necessary to leave the country permanently after she shared a Facebook post suggesting that current wars could also be remembered alongside Anzac war veterans on Anzac Day, resulting in the loss of her employment and threat by politicians to remove her Australian citizenship. See Osman Faruqi, "These Anzac Day 'Controversies' Reveal the Huge Hypocrisy of Australian Conservatives," *Junkee.com*, April 26, 2017, <https://junkee.com/anzac-day-hypocrisy-conservatives/103169/>, and Guilty Feminist, "The Guilty Feminist 95. Identity with Yassmin Abdel-Magied and Liv Francis-Cornibert," *YouTUBE*, April 23, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTCYKFb9yOs>.

and deference. Individuals who offer scrutiny, debate, or dissent are positioned as “despicably deviant” and policed accordingly.²⁶

Rudd’s memoir is deeply linked to the Anzac legend. It is an Anzac tale, and even if the contents of the memoir had gone against Aotearoa New Zealand’s shared cultural beliefs about itself, it would not matter. By virtue of his association with the Anzac legend, Rudd’s personal experiences are metabolized and understood through it. By virtue of the locations in which I was raised, Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, I am also metabolized by the legend and understand myself through it, even though I do not see myself in it. In this way, Rudd’s testimony becomes *our* testimony. This merging of individual and collective identity becomes a troubled space of plural authorship. By imposing a communal narrative where only singular voices typically exist, a forced “we” is constructed on both sides, where only an “I” would usually exist. This “we” is further compounded because the Anzacs are not seen as individuals but as a “collective entity”²⁷ into which Rudd’s “I” is compressed.

Practice-led autotheorizing with Ursula K. Le Guin helped me to set aside the usual military materiality of weapons and heroic visual languages of the Anzac legend to rethink my approach to Rudd’s memoir. Le Guin’s *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* challenges the dominance of the “hero’s tale”²⁸ archetype, advocating for narratives that encompass more than conflict and violence. She offers a narrative counterpoint that makes room for “the life story”²⁹ in the metaphorical form of “carrier bag/belly/box/house/medicine bundle.”³⁰

When I considered decentering the hero from the Anzac legend, I was able to ask, “What am I left with?” In response

26 Alex McConville et al., “Imagining an Emotional Nation: The Print Media and Anzac Day Commemorations in Aotearoa New Zealand,” *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 1 (2017): 106.

27 Jed Donoghue and Bruce Tranter, “The Anzacs: Military Influences on Australian Identity,” *Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 3 (2015): 451.

28 Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, 30.

29 *Ibid.*, 33.

30 *Ibid.*, 34–35.



Fig. 11.1. Cat Auburn (2022–2023), The Memoir of J.F. Rudd. Bronze. Size variable. Photo by Keith Hunter.



Fig. 11.2. Cat Auburn (2022–2023), The Memoir of J.F. Rudd (detail). Bronze. Size variable. Photo by Keith Hunter.



Fig. 11.3. Cat Auburn (2022–2023). *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd*. Film still. 20 mins.



Fig. 11.4. Cat Auburn (2022–2023). *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd*. Film still. 20 mins.

to this question, I realized that what remained was my own relationship to the Anzac legend. My exploration of this relationship manifested through various art practices akin to a “carrier bag” approach. I intricately wove Rudd’s memoir into a lengthy rope, using thousands of plastic alphabet beads. Subsequently, I immersed myself in the narrative by swimming in an icy Scottish reservoir during winter, wrapped in the threaded memoir. I captured this event on film and transformed it into a cinematic portrayal over which I narrated Rudd’s memoir with my own voice. Afterward, I cast the beads in bronze, fashioning the memoir into a sculpture. The final artwork is an installation of the bronze sculpture (figs. 11.1 and 11.2) accompanied by the film (figs. 11.3 and 11.4).

Using an artistic practice-led autotheoretical approach helped me to cross between the borders of both my own and Rudd’s personal experiences and shared narratives. Within *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd*, several autotheoretical modes are at play. First, Rudd’s thoughts and reflections, interwoven with my artistic actions, permeate the material of the sculpture and the film—as embodied through the memoir’s content depicted in bronze alphabet beads and voiceover. Second, my practice-based acts of threading, self-recording, and voiceover constitute an autobiographical exploration of the oscillation between individual and collective memory while I encountered Rudd’s memoir through a range of artistic experiences. Third, I utilize polyvocality within *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd* to autotheoretical effect. This feature literalizes the plural self, as seen in the duplication of my own image (figs. 11.3 and 11.4) and my narrative intertwined with Rudd’s memoir. Through these deliberate actions, I actively position myself alongside Rudd within the framework of his memoir.

These are artistic acts of self-pluralization in which Rudd’s autobiography is reinscribed into my own and mine into his. However, the retrieval of Rudd’s subjecthood from the Anzac-collective through autotheoretical intervention is paradoxical; polyvocality ensures there is no main character. Thus, using autotheoretical practices to shift the narrative of the Anzac legend

away from transcendental heroic conflict risks the erasure of what would nominally be the “hero figure” from his own autobiography. My discomfort with this process is shown in the following diary extract:

22 October 2022 Sometimes it feels so outrageous and transgressive to be claiming plural authorship with J.F. Rudd on the construction and deconstruction of his own memoir. Sometimes it’s difficult to remember my own argument about the collectiveness of the narrative being thrust upon me. The act of transgressing — moving past the fear of being misunderstood as being disrespectful — may be an important act in its own right. I realize that none of these things can be resolved; transgression is necessary.

I encountered additional ethical dilemmas in pluralizing my autotheoretical self. First, my claim to equitability with Rudd is not straightforward. Autotheoretical modes enact a desire for alternative forms of self-expression that counter the reinforcement of harmful aspects of neoliberal individualism.³¹ “The autotheoretical self can be at once an authentically felt ‘my own me’ and a genuine non-appropriative embrace of the other,” says Carolyn Laubender.³² Yet challenges persist in achieving a truly “just relational collaboration,” because the pluralization of the self does not automatically resolve existing challenges.³³ Despite the initial appeal of autotheory’s permission to inhabit and articulate one’s own experiences, thus presumably avoiding misappropriative practices, complexities persist. The assumption of equality with companions in autotheory is murky since the seemingly

³¹ Laubender, *Speak for Your Self*, 49.

³² *Ibid.*, 58.

³³ *Ibid.*

egalitarian placement of diverse testimonies on equal footing beside one's own creates a misleading impression of inherent ethicality. Even as it appears just, collaborative, and egalitarian, autotheory also engages in curation, editing, and selectivity, activities that may inadvertently serve the interests of the autotheoretician over the integrity of collaborative voices. Ultimately, the autotheoretician retains control over which voices to include and the conceptual and formal framing of these voices.³⁴ Concerningly, autotheoretical self-pluralization may inadvertently encourage performative rather than genuine approaches to nonappropriation.³⁵ In assuming an inbuilt ethicality within autotheoretical modes, the autotheoretician may be lulled into a false sense of security and fail to actively seek deeper relationality and collaboration with those voices with which they attempt to speak, thus potentially instrumentalizing others' voices to serve the autotheoretician's own agenda.³⁶

I initially assumed *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd* would function as many autotheoretical interventions do, with citational acknowledgment (irrespective of how experimental) being sufficient. However, because of the complexities of self-pluralization and my desire for an ethically sound collaboration with Rudd, and the need to ensure compliance with copyright laws concerning his memoir, I found it necessary to obtain permission from Rudd's surviving family members to proceed with my work. This personal contact made the stakes of my autotheoretical enquiry tangible, as can be seen in the following diary entry:

3 March 2023

Asking myself questions [about the ethicality of autotheoretical self-pluralization] made me realize that it was finally time to sort out the copyright aspects of working with Rudd's memoir moving forward. This

34 Baxter and Auburn, "Introduction for Special Issue 'Autotheory in Contemporary Visual Arts Practice.'"

35 Ibid., and Laubender, *Speak for Your Self*, 49.

36 Laubender, *Speak for Your Self*, 59.

was intimidating — my fear of getting in trouble and the stress of this went through the roof! The reason for [my feelings of stress] is the confrontation of the reality of the critique I am undertaking — the [real possibility] that I will offend folk by questioning how we engage with Anzac stories and how these are implicated in narratives of nation-building. However, I won't find answers by closing myself down to obstacles or critique.

I tried to stay with the trouble³⁷ of potential conflict — to recognize that by asking permission to work with this text [it would create situations that allow me] to ask further questions I have around the ethics of working with others' stories. There is another layer to this — because Rudd has passed away — these permissions are filtered through his family and dependent on their open-mindedness or personal bias.

I'm trying to push into difficult territory when I suggest that Rudd's story is both his own and a collective story — a universal "Anzac" story — and therefore also my story given the mechanisms of nationalizing collective memory.

Even though I was ultimately granted permission to work with Rudd's memoir by his family,³⁸ the majority of concerns voiced above are only resolved by a Haraway-ian staying with the trou-

37 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 1. This is in reference to Haraway's suggestion to neither fix nor turn away from trouble but instead to remain capable of response.

38 With heartfelt gratitude to the Rudd family.

ble, in this case, by determining that nonresolution and potential conflict can hold instructive possibilities.³⁹

The complexities of striving for a “just relational collaboration”⁴⁰ when working autotheoretically represents the limits or boundaries of autotheory’s decolonizing aspirations.⁴¹ The decolonizing project of autotheory is generally enacted, particularly within academia, through the embodied centering of those previously marginalized within established theoretical discourse.⁴² What is unclear is the tenability of these ambitions within individual projects of autotheory, particularly when considering autotheory’s fashioning of a plural self. A favorable interpretation of *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd* may see the reinsertion of my female autobiographic self within the distinctly male narrative of the Anzac legend as an act of decolonization. However, an antagonistic reading could suggest that, because Rudd is male and because I fall on the disadvantaged side of our gendered power dynamic, I am enabled to appropriate his narrative “in the service of better securing [my] own name.”⁴³ When taken a step further, if a demographic shift or intersectional consideration of power dynamics between myself and those I engage with were to reveal that I hold more privilege, my project of autotheory seemingly shifts into outright misappropriation. Here we reach the limits of the decolonizing potential of autotheoretical self-pluralization. Beyond this point, the claim to equitability feels untenable. Through the lens of the Anzac legend, my practice-based exploration of an autotheoretical plural self revealed that there is no single answer to resolving the ethical issues inherent within narrative entanglement. As suggested by Laubender, autotheory’s retooling of the self as plural cannot

39 With thanks to Kyle Tynan Lewis for conversations regarding transgression and staying with the trouble.

40 Laubender, *Speak for Your Self*, 58.

41 With thanks to Katherine Baxter for conversations on the decolonizing potential of autotheory.

42 Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, 268.

43 Laubender, *Speak for Your Self*, 59.

secure an ethical relational collaboration; it can only express a desire for such a collaboration.⁴⁴

Practice-Led Autotheorizing

When I first encountered autotheory in 2020, there was a burgeoning body of scholarship speculating about its definition and yet scarce material regarding its actual application. Furthermore, most autotheoretical works were literary, and the few artistic examples I came across either instrumentalized or merely illustrated critical theory. This lack of deeper engagement with theory by autotheoretical art practitioners was unexpected, especially considering the remarkable achievements of numerous literary autotheories available. Consequently, the lack of art practice-based examples made it challenging for me to initiate an approach to autotheory that prioritized artistic materials and processes. As the diary entry below shows, I wanted to cultivate a robust autotheoretical approach, one that moved beyond simply depicting or exploiting theory within my artistic practice:⁴⁵

5 July 2021

How can I theorize with and through my artistic practice?

How can I create new theory? How can I live with it, adapt it, really engage with it through the practice of art making? I don't want to just cite theory; I want to roll in the mud with it.

In *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd*, I theorize by employing artistic practices as tools for empirical investigation and the visualization of theoretical ideas, a method I first encountered in Adrian Piper's *Food for the Spirit* (1971). In her 2021 monograph on autotheory, Fournier identified Piper as an excellent example of the kind

⁴⁴ Ibid., 58.

⁴⁵ With thanks to Maria Gil Ulldemolins for conversations on autotheory and practice-led theorizing.

of autotheoretical engagement I had been looking for, one that utilizes the processes and qualities of artistic practice.⁴⁶ Fournier positions Piper as an “early innovator”⁴⁷ in autotheory, analyzing Piper’s practice-led exploration (*Food for the Spirit*) of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Piper documented a private endurance performance, photographing herself at intervals while reading Kant, fasting, and practicing yoga. Fournier suggests that Piper contributes to advancing scholarship on Kantian philosophy, highlighting the significance of Piper’s photographs as traces of her private performance: “More than performance documentation, the photographs embody Piper’s literalizing of Kant’s transcendental aesthetic through the empirical confirmation of the ‘I’ that self-imaging provides.”⁴⁸ Seeing Piper’s way of metabolizing and expanding upon theory through artistic practice allowed me to shift my own engagement with theory beyond the reading and referencing of it into a theorizing art practice, one that asks questions, engages with theory, and contributes to theory through artistic materials and processes.

I use commemorative material languages and artistic processes in *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd* to engage deeply with Le Guin’s *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, a process that, in turn, allows me to critically examine and contest the dominant narrative of military heroism that forms a core part of Aotearoa New Zealand’s collective identity. Shanti Sumartojo defines commemoration as “a set of practices and narratives that draw together national identity, collective and individual memory, grief and mourning, regular ritual, collectivity and material, aesthetic representations of war and death.”⁴⁹ Reenactment is a

46 Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art*, 71–81. Many of the art practice-based examples offered by Fournier engage with metanarratives of art-world investment in critical theory and artists’ negotiation of the self within this framework. The autotheoretical inquiry here is often limited to a commentary on the general field of critical theory and often appears to have superficial engagement with the actual content of theory.

47 Ibid., 74.

48 Ibid., 73–74.

49 Sumartojo, “Commemorative Atmospheres,” 541.

commemorative language I theorize with in *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd*. War reenactments are generally nostalgic re-creations of a battle or military event in precise, authentic (or close enough) detail down to the location, people, uniforms, and equipment.⁵⁰ Svetlana Boym explains:

Nostalgia is often a disease⁵¹ of war buffs, not war veterans who prefer to fight staged battles on their own terms. Civil War battlefields have been turned into nostalgic sites where history might be buried but the “experience of battle” can be thoroughly recreated [...]. Everything short of killing [...]. Recreated battles do not approximate the actual experience of war as much as another real-life experience — that of being an extra on a movie-set. Authenticity here is visual, not historical.⁵²

The reduction of war to purely aesthetic reenactment is a performed form of what Boym terms “restorative nostalgia.”⁵³ Restorative nostalgia reconstructs the past in an idealized form and is often used to bolster nationalistic narratives; many commemorative reenactment practices fall into this category by maintaining an idealized military past within the present.

Commemorative reenactment shares a citational modality with autotheory:

Citation, repetition, and “twice-behaved behaviour,” as the very material of daily behaviour, provide the basis for why and how reenactors can reenact at all. Think of it this way: Battle reenactors can reenact the US Civil War because they can place their bodies in the gestic compositions — the sedimented set of acts — that US Civil War soldiers composed

50 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001), 37, and Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (Routledge, 2011), 10.

51 Boym is referring here to nostalgia’s origin as a medical disorder.

52 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 37–38.

53 Ibid., 42–43.

when those soldiers were themselves behaving as they had been trained to behave, or as they emulated others to behave, behaviours likewise and at the time based on prior practices and precedent notions of what it means and what it might mean to fight.⁵⁴

In *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd*, I threaded Rudd's memoir with thousands of alphabet beads onto a fifty-two-meter-long (about 170 feet) continuous string. This is a process that repeats physical actions reminiscent of "gestic compositions"—practices rooted in historical, trained, or emulated precedents. In contrast to battle reenactors, whose actions Schneider describes as "sedimented sets of [militaristic] acts," my process is rooted in the traditions of crafting and storytelling. This act of threading not only physically reenacts Rudd's memories and narratives but also interlaces my own experience with Rudd's memoir, thereby literalizing an autotheoretical exploration of a plural self. My use of repetition reimagines the traditional concept of commemorative reenactment, providing a counterpoint to the simplifying tendencies of restorative nostalgia, and instead adopts a nuanced "carrier bag" approach to the "killer story"⁵⁵ so beloved of war reenactors.

In *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd*, I theorize with another commemorative language: bronze memorial monuments. Traditional commemorative monuments, by imparting singular messages through idealized, symbolic imagery, play a didactic role in shaping collective memory, encouraging selective remembering by simplifying complex narratives.⁵⁶ They are not politically neutral but are instead designed to evoke emotions of self-sacrifice and national pride, parsing martial achievement as a national virtue.⁵⁷ Commemorative monuments, often mired

54 Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 10.

55 Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, 33.

56 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 42–43, and Quentin Stevens, Karen A. Franck, and Ruth Fazakerley, "Counter-Monuments: The Anti-Monumental and the Dialogic," *The Journal of Architecture* 17, no. 9 (2012): 961.

57 Sumartojo, "Commemorative Atmospheres," 548.

in controversy for their selective historical representation and the socioeconomic power dynamics they reflect,⁵⁸ are cultural artifacts that enable the transference of national ideals and patriotic, “self-sacrificing love”⁵⁹ to future generations⁶⁰ via a process Jeffery Andrew Barash describes as “an act of imaginative association.”⁶¹ This is the transference of communally significant events to subsequent generations through symbols that are meaningful to the collective, and this process reorders and reencodes collective memory to ensure its relevance in contemporary culture.⁶² Similarly, the Anzac legend is maintained through the imaginative association with its symbols encoded in cultural artifacts, such as memorial monuments. Bronze’s economic value, symbolic prestige, and favorable physical attributes — such as its versatility of form and enduring lifespan — render it a popular and recognizable material for monumental commemorative gestures.⁶³ These attributes, alongside bronze’s socio-political-historical associations with commemoration, initially influenced me to include it in my autotheoretical inquiry.

58 Katharyne Mitchell, “Monuments, Memorials, and the Politics of Memory,” *Urban Geography* 24, no. 5 (2003), 443–49; Tim Edensor and Shanti Sumartojo, “Reified Monuments, Counter Memorials and Anti-Memorials: Contested Colonial Heritage in Melbourne: Commemorating John Batman,” *Postcolonial Studies* 26, no. 4 (2023): 1–2; Natalia Krzyżanowska, “The Discourse of Counter-Monuments: Semiotics of Material Commemoration in Contemporary Urban Spaces,” *Social Semiotics* 26, no. 5 (2016): 469–70; and Jonathan Black, “‘Thanks for the Memory’: War Memorials, Spectatorship and the Trajectories of Commemoration 1919–2001,” in *Matters of Conflict: Material Culture, Memory and the First World War*, ed. Nicholas J. Saunders (Routledge, 2004), 134.

59 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 2016), 141.

60 Anne Rigney, “Cultural Memory Studies: Mediation, Narrative, and the Aesthetic,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies*, ed. Anna Lisa Tota and Trever Hagen (Routledge, 2016), 65.

61 Jeffrey Andrew Barash, *Collective Memory and the Historical Past* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 47.

62 Ibid.

63 Francesca G. Bewer, “Bronze Casting: The Art of Translation,” in *Bronze*, ed. David Ekserdjian (Royal Academy of Arts, 2012), 24, and Timothy Potts, “The Ancient Near East and Egypt,” in *ibid.*, 41.

I cast my original autotheoretical act in *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd*—the threading of alphabet beads—into the commemorative material of bronze (figs. 11.1 and 11.2). Two acts of autotheorizing with Le Guin's *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* are present here. In my first act, I gave physical form to my autotheoretical explorations by challenging the monumental, idealized, and symbolic modes of representation found in traditional bronze memorials, because these modes enable the didactic, intergenerational reinscription of Anzac collective memory and contribute to the disquieting sense of dissonance I experience. In contrast, *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd* is a bronze sculpture composed of multiple parts, which critically engages with a complex, nuanced, and specific narrative. It is a representation of the Anzac legend in which I experience myself as present through my artistic interventions in bronze.

My second act of autotheorizing utilizes Erin Manning's concept of the "minor gesture," which identifies the power in small, often overlooked actions and expressions that challenge dominant norms to form new ways of thinking and being.⁶⁴ This idea emphasizes the creative potential found at the margins and the subtle, emergent processes that diverge from mainstream values.⁶⁵ In *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd*, my engagement as a variation from the standard is an embodiment of this minor gesture. It is present in my artistic act of intentionally developing an alternative mode of engaging with the Anzac legend, which differs from mainstream approaches—choosing a "carrier bag" narrative over a "killer story." This choice reflects Le Guin's idea of a "continuing process"⁶⁶ in which I shift the focus of the Anzac

64 Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Duke University Press, 2016), 1–4.

65 Ibid., 1–4, 65–66. The framework for Manning's development and explication of the theory "minor gesture" is neurodivergence. Manning emphasizes that her theory is not intended to instruct the reader in how to "make" a minor gesture; instead her focus is on the invention of "techniques that resist immediate capture by the major," in other words, how to develop techniques that can exist, even if momentarily, outside of normalizing systems of power, including neurotypicality (66).

66 Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, 35.

narrative from that of conflict, violence, conquering, or being conquered to storytelling as a process of ongoing change and development. By using bronze, the material language of commemoration, to articulate a minor gesture, I reify the act of seeking this shift in focus. By casting my autobiographic, intimate, everyday actions into bronze on a domestic scale, I not only commemorate my intention to engage with the Anzac legend through a new lens but also physically manifest my theoretical exploration. This act challenges the “institutional frameworks”⁶⁷ of collective remembering (and forgetting) that play into the instrumentalization of Anzac narratives for national identity, thereby troubling these frameworks in a manner that echoes Le Guin’s proposition of the carrier bag as a tool for storytelling.

My autotheoretical engagement with material languages and artistic processes serve as both the means and traces of my theorizing.⁶⁸ I communicate this theorizing to an audience through these traces, which take the form of artistic outputs such as sculptures and films. Articulating this process in the written word feels uncomfortable for me. In my view, the clarity and comprehensibility of art practice-based theorizing are lessened because of the challenges involved in converting different ways of producing knowledge into language-based versions, especially in order to fit them into the traditionally recognized forms of theory within academia.⁶⁹ Trinh T. Minh-ha demonstrates the benefits of trusting form to communicate itself to its audience, referencing Asian and African storytelling traditions:

Nothing is explained, everything is evoked. When explanations were requested, the storyteller would pause, listen carefully, and after due consideration, repeat exactly the passage relevant to the question. No more, no less. Here, there is no necessity to reduce the plural meaning of the story to some

67 Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 74.

68 With thanks to Christine Borland for conversations regarding art practice and its generation of theory.

69 Baxter and Auburn, “Introduction for Special Issue ‘Autotheory in Contemporary Visual Arts Practice.’”

flat explanatory answer, and the questioner is invited to listen again more mindfully to what he or she has missed. Since form cannot be separated from content—the form of the story being (integral to) the story itself—there is no other way to say it without reforming it (that is, un/intentionally modifying, augmenting or narrowing it). [...] The quality emphasized here is the ability to imply, rather than to expose something in its entirety; to suggest and evoke, rather than delineate laboriously.⁷⁰

By emphasizing the integral relationship between form and content, Trinh suggests that seeking external clarification risks diminishing both understanding and the essence of the subject.⁷¹ This concept extends to other mediums, such as sculptural thinking, where the demand for overclarification in language may overlook the nuances conveyed through the material itself. Trinh's encouragement to trust in the form—rather than exhaustively to delineate it—reinforces my confidence in the material choices and artistic processes of my autotheorizing. Insisting on linguistic overclarification of autotheorizing that is led by art practice risks missing points made in paint, textile, film, or bronze.

My experiences during the development of *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd* demonstrate the transformative potential of autotheory for those seeking to develop a more dynamic approach to theoretical inquiry through artistic materials and processes. In doing so, I trust that my project clarifies one of the ways in which artistic practice contributes to theoretical discourse beyond its own field. The autotheoretical approach I adopted with *The Memoir of J.F. Rudd* did not reduce the dissonance I feel toward traditional representations of the Anzac legend. Instead, autotheory became a valuable tool, allowing me to understand the cultural processes that create the conditions for this dis-

⁷⁰ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Routledge, 1991), 162.

⁷¹ Ibid.

sonance. Throughout the course of this inquiry, I encountered numerous unanticipated ethical dilemmas. The latter prompted my appreciation for, and caution with regard to, the limitations of autotheory. As a result, I present autotheory as a framework for identifying ethical risks, thereby enabling the formulation of more insightful questions, rather than presenting it as a stand-alone solution.

Bibliography

- Amodeo, Gabrielle. "Trauma and Autotheory in an Expanded Practice of Life Drawing." *Arts* 11, no. 5 (2022): 80. DOI: 10.3390/arts11050080.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 2016.
- "Anzac Day." *The Press* (Christchurch), April 27, 1925, 14. <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19250427.2.103>.
- Barash, Jeffrey Andrew. *Collective Memory and the Historical Past*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Baxter, Katherine, and Cat Auburn. "Introduction for Special Issue 'Autotheory in Contemporary Visual Arts Practice.'" *Arts* 12, no. 1 (2023): 11. DOI: 10.3390/arts12010011.
- Belich, James. "War." In *The Future of the Past: Themes in New Zealand History*, edited by Colin Davis and Peter Lineham. Massey University, 1991.
- Bewer, Francesca G. "Bronze Casting: The Art of Translation." In *Bronze*, edited by David Ekserdjian. Royal Academy of Arts, 2012.
- Black, Jonathan. "'Thanks for the Memory': War Memorials, Spectatorship and the Trajectories of Commemoration 1919–2001." In *Matters of Conflict: Material Culture, Memory and the First World War*, edited by Nicholas J. Saunders. Routledge, 2004.
- Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, 2001.
- Cunningham, Katie. "Ziggy Ramo on Black Snow, Anzac Day and His Q+A Controversy: 'I was like, I've broken the Matrix!'" *The Guardian*, December 23, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/dec/24/ziggy-ramo-on-black-snow-anzac-day-and-his-qa-controversy-i-was-like-ive-broken-the-matrix/>.
- Donoghue, Jed, and Bruce Tranter. "The Anzacs: Military Influences on Australian Identity." *Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 3 (2015): 449–63. DOI: 10.1177/1440783312473669.

- Edensor, Tim, and Shanti Sumartojo. "Reified Monuments, Counter Memorials and Anti-Memorials: Contested Colonial Heritage in Melbourne: Commemorating John Batman." *Postcolonial Studies* 26, no. 4 (2023): 1–24. DOI: 10.1080/13688790.2023.2234119.
- Faruqi, Osman. "These Anzac Day 'Controversies' Reveal the Huge Hypocrisy of Australian Conservatives." *Junkee.com*, April 26, 2017. <https://junkee.com/anzac-day-hypocrisy-conservatives/103169/>.
- Graham, Jeanine. "Young New Zealanders and the Great War." *Paedagogica Historica* 44, no. 4 (2008): 429–44. DOI: 10.1080/00309230802218306.
- Guilty Feminist. "The Guilty Feminist 95. Identity with Yassmin Abdel-Magied and Liv Francis-Cornibert." *YouTube*, April 23, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTCYKFbgyOs>.
- Fournier, Lauren. *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. MIT Press, 2021.
- Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- Khan, Joanna. "The Evolution of Anzac Day from 1915 until Today." *Australian Geographic*, April 24, 2017. <https://www.australiangeographic.com.au/blogs/on-this-day/2017/04/evolution-of-anzac-day/>.
- Krzyżanowska, Natalia. "The Discourse of Counter-Monuments: Semiotics of Material Commemoration in Contemporary Urban Spaces." *Social Semiotics* 26, no. 5 (2016): 465–85. DOI: 10.1080/10350330.2015.1096132.
- Lake, Marilyn, and Henry Reynolds, eds. *What's Wrong with Anzac? The Militarisation of Australian History*. University of New South Wales Press, 2010.
- Laubender, Carolyn. "Speak for Your Self: Psychoanalysis, Autotheory, and the Plural Self." *The Arizona Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2020): 39–64. DOI: 10.1353/arq.2020.0001.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*. Ignota Books, 2019.

- Ma, Ming-Yuen S. *There Is No Soundtrack*. Manchester University Press, 2020.
- Macdonald, Charlotte. "The First World War and the Making of Colonial Memory." *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 33, no. 2 (2015): 15–37. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43681960>.
- Macleod, Jenny. "The Fall and Rise of Anzac Day: 1965 and 1990 Compared." *War & Society* 20, no. 1 (2002): 149–68. DOI: 10.1179/072924702791201935.
- McConville, Alex, Tim McCreanor, Margaret Wetherell, and Helen Moewaka Barnes. "Imagining an Emotional Nation: The Print Media and Anzac Day Commemorations in Aotearoa New Zealand." *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 1 (2017): 94–110. DOI: 10.1177/0163443716672300.
- McKenna, Mark, and Stuart Ward. "It Was Really Moving, Mate': The Gallipoli Pilgrimage and Sentimental Nationalism in Australia." *Australian Historical Studies* 38, no. 129 (2007): 141–51. DOI: 10.1080/10314610708601236.
- Mein Smith, Philippa. "The 'NZ' in Anzac: Different Remembrance and Meaning." *First World War Studies* 7, no. 2 (2016): 193–211. DOI: 10.1080/19475020.2016.1254097.
- . "The Tasman World." In *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, edited by Giselle Byrnes. Oxford University Press Australia & New Zealand, 2009.
- Manning, Erin. *The Minor Gesture*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- Mitchell, Katharyne. "Monuments, Memorials, and the Politics of Memory." *Urban Geography* 24, no. 5 (2003): 442–59. DOI: 10.2747/0272-3638.24.5.442.
- "Modern Anzac Day." *New Zealand History Nga korero a ipurangi o Aotearoa*. <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/page/modern-anzac-day>.
- Pawar, Simran. "Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZACS) in World War One: The Making of National Identity and Erasure of Women and People of Color." Undergraduate Thesis, University of Central Florida, 2020. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/honorstheses/743>.

- Potts, Timothy. "The Ancient Near East and Egypt." In *Bronze*, edited by David Ekserdjian. Royal Academy of Arts, 2012.
- Rigney, Anne. "Cultural Memory Studies Mediation, Narrative, and the Aesthetic." In *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies*, edited by Anna Lisa Tota and Trever Hagen. Routledge, 2016.
- Rudd, James Foster. *Manuscript Recollections of Service at Gallipoli and in Egypt/Palestine (1915–1916) [1974]*. Liddle Collection, University of Leeds Library, Leeds, UK. <https://explore.library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/650659/memoirs>.
- Schneider, Rebecca. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. Routledge, 2011.
- Stevens, Quentin, Karen A. Franck, and Ruth Fazakerley. "Counter-Monuments: The Anti-Monumental and the Dialogic." *The Journal of Architecture* 17, no. 9 (2012): 951–72. DOI: 10.1080/13602365.2012.746035.
- Sumartojo, Shanti. "Commemorative Atmospheres: Memorial Sites, Collective Events and the Experience of National Identity." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 41, no. 4 (2016): 541–53. DOI: 10.1111/tran.12144.
- Trinh T. Minh-ha. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Routledge, 1991.
- Walker, Franchesca. "'Descendants of a Warrior Race': The Maori Contingent, New Zealand Pioneer Battalion, and Martial Race Myth, 1914–19." *War & Society* 31, no. 1 (2012): 1–21. DOI: 10.1179/204243411X13201386799091.
- Weidinger, Rachel. "Polyvocal Narrative Strategy: Turning Many Voices into Durable Change." *Narrative Initiative*. <https://narrativeinitiative.org/blog/polyvocal-narrative-strategy-turning-many-voices-into-durable-change/>.
- Wiegman, Robyn. "Introduction: Autotheory Theory." *The Arizona Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2020): 1–14. DOI: 10.1353/arq.2020.0009.

Seeing Double: Autofabulist Others and Autotheoretical Self-Relation in the Works of Saeed Jones and Lola Flash

Alexandra Wood

My first exposure to autotheory happened in a pew on a Sunday night. I sat quietly next to my family, facing toward the huge, arched window above the maroon-carpeted stage where my grandfather, uncle, and father preached by turns on Sunday mornings. But on Sunday nights, the stage was empty; Sunday nights were for testimony. The testifier stood at the bottom of the stairs leading to the stage, in front of the white plaster table that held tiny plastic cups of grape juice during communion. Each testimony was different, but they all followed the same three-act structure. First, the testifier described in detail what their life was like before converting to Christianity, then they narrated the conversion experience itself, and finally they resolved the arc with a reflection about how glad they were to be a Christian now.

In many ways, their testimonies functioned as autotheory, which Lauren Fournier defines as “the integration of the auto

or ‘self’ with philosophy or theory, often in ways that are direct, performative, or self-aware.”¹ On stage, they wove together their experiences with textual and theoretical insights, but they cited Paul and Peter instead of Barthes and Derrida. Unlike autotheorists, however, the available citational archive was limited entirely to the pages of our Bibles, and any analysis had to conform to the preordained conclusions of orthodoxy. Every confession had the same goal: to reaffirm the authority of our church, to reassure all of us that we were right, safe in our pews. It was straight out of Foucault, not that I knew who Foucault was then.

I tried to focus my attention on the testifiers’ spiritual insights, but I was always most interested in the preconversion first act of their story. No one admitted it, but the first act was by far the most important — and the most interesting. The more dramatic the “before,” the more invested we all became in the “after.” The problem was that I was a terrible testifier. I barely had a first act. Instead, I had prayed the “sinner’s prayer” at four years old and had spent every moment of my childhood either at church, at the Christian school connected to the church, or at home with my ministerial family. I knew that no amount of spiritual insight could make up for my lack of dramatic material.

Twenty years later, I was sitting in a graduate seminar, trying to follow a rapid-fire discussion that had started out focused on identity in Stuart Hall’s work but had shifted into something more personal. Disclaimers about positionality escalated into increasingly personal disclosures that felt oddly competitive, as if the person who could claim the most traumatic experience would gain the authority to hold the floor. I welcomed the chance to learn more about my colleagues, but something about the increasing reliance on traumatic disclosure felt eerily familiar. Or, perhaps, it is more accurate to say that what felt familiar was my anxiety about the value of my own experience. I felt I had somehow been here before.

1 Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (MIT Press, 2022), 6.

Arianne Zwartjes describes her autotheoretical process as a repeated return to the question, “Where is your body in all of this?”² My answers to this question have often felt irreducible to a single time or location. In my research, I could locate myself as the critic or the academic, trying to read closely in order to excavate meaning. This was complicated, however, by the fact that most of my work recently has taken up questions that circulate around the ethics of witnessing and commodifying trauma, a process that has seemed increasingly in tension with the fact that I have been doing this work in exchange for the caché and material resources of a PhD. My work includes studying Saeed Jones’s four-part prose poem sequence, “Saeed, or the Other One,” and activist photographer Lola Flash’s *syzygy, the vision*, a series of self-portraits, one of which is the cover of Jones’s *Alive at the End of the World*. And, thus, Jones, Flash, and I are bound together in this autotheoretical enterprise.

Testimony and pain take center stage in Saeed Jones’s “Saeed, or the Other One.” The speaker, a poet named Saeed Jones, has just finished speaking at a poetry reading when he notices a white man in the audience who raises his hand before the applause has even finished. When Saeed³ reluctantly calls on him, the man asks, “Do you think you need your pain in order to write?” In response, Saeed quips “in a voice that was [his] as much as it wasn’t, ‘Oh, honey, [...] you’ve got it all wrong. My pain needs *me*.” His tone and facial expressions provoke a laugh from the audience, but Saeed is internally unsettled. In the sections that follow, Saeed is alarmed to discover that his pain, embodied as his doppelganger, has taken up residence in his living room “to find out why [the pain] needs [him].”⁴

2 Arianne Zwartjes, “Autotheory as Rebellion: On Research, Embodiment, and Imagination in Creative Nonfiction,” *Michigan Quarterly Review*, July 2019, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2019/07/autotheory-as-rebellion-on-research-embodiment-and-imagination-in-creative-nonfiction/>.

3 I use “Saeed” to refer to the poem’s speaker and “Jones” to refer to the poet himself, but the blurred lines between the two are important to note, as I discuss in a later section.

4 Saeed Jones, *Alive at the End of the World* (Coffee House Press, 2022), 19.

In April 2023, the man's question and Saeed's to himself were on my mind as I attended a talk in which Jones described the process of life-writing and then read from *Alive at the End of the World*. When I returned to reread the "Other One" series afterward, I realized that my mental image of the poem's setting had shifted to resemble the auditorium I had been sitting in. My memory and the poem were entangled; my body was not only reading but also sitting in the audience, scribbling frantic notes. In that virtual memory space, I looked around to see if I could spot the white man, with his "white balloon of [a] blank stare," raising his hand. And then I realized I recognized him — in myself. As much as I abhorred the logic driving the question, I had to admit that I also wanted to know the answer. After all, I thought, it would be great to be able to cite Jones's answer in this chapter. The pronouns on the page flipped: Did *I* need *his* pain in order to write?

The encounter that Jones stages is a literal self-reflection that materializes on and through his own body. By placing his embodied experience alongside his theoretical investments and claims, Jones's work models a form of autotheoretical practice. This autotheoretical practice is at work throughout *Alive at the End of the World*, the collection that houses the "Saeed, or the Other One" sequence. *Alive* is polyvocal, formally inventive, and explicitly grounded in an eclectic citational archive. Several of the poems are staged in direct dialogue with theorists such as Frank Wilderson and Toni Morrison along with performers such as Little Richard and Aretha Franklin. By performing his own iterative interaction with the text, Jones situates his writing within a network of theory. In the final section of the book, "Notes at the End of the World," Jones includes both detailed citation endnotes and further commentary. Many of these notes contextualize, recontextualize, and even destabilize the poems to which they are appended; these notes, combined with the cyclic and reiterative structure of the collection, prompt rereading and develop a temporal layer of repetition and multiplicity.

The autotheoretical modality and performance in *Alive* is similarly leveraged by activist photographer Lola Flash in their

series of self-portraits, including the one on the cover. According to Flash, the title of this series, *syzygy, the vision*, refers both to the planetary alignment of pasts, presents, and futures and to the name of Flash's "avatar" in the photographs.⁵ As *syzygy*, Flash embodies a mythic, gender-neutral being who appears in an orange prison jumpsuit and a white astronaut's helmet. Flash originally titled the emergent series "Afrofuturism," a label that remains attached to the artist's description of the series posted on their website. Although Flash has worked with critical attention to the political affordances of portrait photography in previous series,⁶ the *syzygy, the vision* series marks their most explicitly conceptual work to date.⁷ *Syzygy, the vision* is also Flash's first series of self-portraits. Flash stages their body in relation to theory, especially in the Afrofuturist speculative sense of theory that envisions a world to come. By explicitly labeling Flash's work as "autotheory," I align their work with Fournier's insistence that autotheory is "fundamentally transdisciplinary" and a "mode of artistic practice."⁸ Flash's methodology enables an insistence on collectivity and relation that theorizes an "otherwise" path through questions of representation and pain.

Like Flash's methodology, autotheory engages recognition by situating narrated experience within a citational network. Fournier uses "intertextual identification" and "intertextual intimacy" as paired terms that refer to "that moment of seeing

5 Karen Jaime, "Talking about Joy, Legacies, and Afrofuturity: An Interview with Lola Flash," *ASAP/Journal*, March 8, 2021, <https://asapjournal.com/talking-about-joy-legacies-and-afrofuturity-an-interview-with-lola-flash/>.

6 See, for example, in the description of *[sur]passing*, Flash cites Kobena Mercer's "pigmentocracy" to ground their meditation on colorism in the Black diaspora. Flash uses a large-format camera and installs the portraits above eye level "so that the viewer has no choice but to 'look up'" to their subjects. For more, see Hannah Abel-Hirsch, "I Want My Subjects to Be Seen, Not Scrutinized," *The British Journal of Photography*, July 2, 2019, <https://www.1854.photography/2019/07/i-want-my-subjects-to-be-seen-not-scrutinised/>.

7 This assessment of the level of conceptual content in Flash's work is their own evaluation. See Jaime, "Talking about Joy, Legacies, and Afrofuturity."

8 Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art*, 2, 3.

oneself in an other, or recognizing one's experiences in a new way," a way that ("often, though not always") appears in autotheoretical citational practice as "a way of referencing or placing alongside."⁹ I use "recognition," here, to refer to a process of both relational understanding and understanding achieved through relation.¹⁰ Writing with Alex Brostoff, Fournier emphasizes that autotheory "privileges thinking with over thinking against; its politics of citation unveil its relations."¹¹ The relational web of citation that autotheory enters can be a sticky one, both in the colloquial sense of difficulty and in the "effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs."¹² Leila C. Nadir points out that autotheory's entanglement with theory can easily slide into another form of grasping at institutional cultural capital, especially when writers of color are expected to include white citations in order to gain credibility.¹³ Fournier further extends the question by pointing out that trouble can come not only because of whom we cite but also because of how we do so. For example, she notes the possibility for citation to function as "a way of incorporating others into oneself—a figurative cannibalization—for primarily one's own benefit."¹⁴ Fournier's response is to attend to the spatiality of "feminist theorizing," which "introduces another way of being with theory that is less assimilative [...] and more akin to an ally or a friend, something positioned *beside*."¹⁵ Vilashini Cooppan incarnates this spatial

9 Ibid., 149.

10 The use of recognition also evokes connotations having to do with the legal system. This sense is relevant to my later concerns about the linkage between visibility and human rights, but my usage throughout the article is focused on the social sense of the word as I describe here.

11 Alex Brostoff and Lauren Fournier, "Introduction: Autotheory ASAP! Academia, Decoloniality, and 'I,'" *ASAP/Journal* 6, no. 3 (2021): 490.

12 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 90.

13 Leila C. Nadir, "More Life after Ruins: Autotheory, the Politics of Citation, and the Limits of the Scholarly Gaze," *ASAP/Journal* 6, no. 3 (2021): 540.

14 Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art*, 197.

15 Ibid., 110 (emphasis added). Fournier continues by referencing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's meditation on "beside" in *Touching Feeling*; my italics for

relationship by describing autotheory's citational practices as "a critical touching of one text to another that reveals a critical kinship, relational synergies and strange bedfellows [which] enac[t] a fleshly, bodily poetics, and adopts a formal practice of bringing things together."¹⁶ This kind of autotheoretical citational practice can thus also blur the borders around the self — that is, the writing "I" — meshing into and with the Other. The inclusion of the *auto-* offers an opportunity to reject the spectating posture that theory historically imposes in order to include the body as attached, specific, and material.

With this in mind, it might seem paradoxical that I am interested in the virtual body of Saeed's pain-double in "Saeed, or the Other One" and Flash's "avatar," syzygy. My interest in the virtual and the avatar brings together two dimensions of autotheory: its attention to embodiment and its sense of multiplicity and plurality. I suggest that the autotheoretical body itself can be multiplied not only discursively but also virtually and performatively. I term this process "autofabulation" in order to gesture toward its imaginative and speculative possibilities and also to establish it in a genealogy of theory that explores how narrative, falsity, and performance open up new ways of seeing and responding, both to others and to ourselves. (Or, to be more precise, I should say "myself.") Perhaps not surprisingly, autofabulation as a critical keyword appears more frequently in discussions about autofiction than about autotheory. Vincent Colonna coined the term "autofabulation" (*la fabulation de soi*) in 2004 in order to index the utility of "falsehood which intentionally troubles narrative elements taken to be true."¹⁷ Colonna's sense of the word derives from Bergson's "fabulatory function," which describes myths deployed by religious groups to maintain control. Berg-

beside here are intended to carry over Fournier's emphasis on the term in her discussion of Sedgwick in the original text.

16 Vilashini Cooppan, "Skin, Kin, Kind, I/You/We: Autotheory's Compositional Grammar," *ASAP/Journal* 6, no. 3 (2021): 587.

17 Benoît Loiseau, "Against the Tyranny of Fact: Autofabulation as a Queer Strategy of Resistance," *NECSUS*, 2022, <https://necsus-ejms.org/against-the-tyranny-of-the-fact-autofabulation-as-a-queer-strategy-of-resistance/>.

son is concerned that “a fiction, if its image is vivid and insistent, may indeed masquerade as perception and in that way prevent or modify action.”¹⁸ The power for the “fabulatory” and fictional to modify action is certainly borne out in my own experience within a high-control religious group, but studying doubles has taught me to look for multiplicity and cross-purposes.

The most challenging piece of exploring Jones’s and Flash’s autotheoretical interventions has been the imperative not to excise my experience, my implication, my body, my “I” in the process. In what follows, I attempt to return to Zwartjes’s question — “Where is my body in all this?” — to reflect on my own “critical touch,” where and how I leave fingerprints. Sara Ahmed insists that “theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin,”¹⁹ and so I want to use my body and my experience critically. My body and my experience strengthen and clarify the analysis of my theoretical work, while my theoretical work prompts me to analyze my lived experience with ever-increasing rigor. In other words, I want to remain a terrible testifier with no allegiance to a predetermined outcome. As I have thought about testimony, I have found it helpful to reflect on my evangelical upbringing as an embodiment of many of the white supremacist logics that Jones and Flash subvert. My childhood and adolescent experiences in white evangelicalism fostered unquestioning allegiance to white patriarchal structures of objectivity and authority alongside a deep sense of self-doubt. My experience also programmed me with a fundamentalist sense of binary, black-and-white logic that has proved difficult to shake. Even rejecting rigidity has proved treacherous. For example, in writing this paragraph, I have struggled to resist the temptation to stage a dichotomous opposition between my past and my present that would imply that my present self represents a perfect antithesis to the fundamentalist white supremacy of my past. As much as I would like to fall back into the rigid security of “or” and “rather than” to propel me away from that which repels me, the re/dou-

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press, 2017), 11.

bled folds of autotheory's subjects and methods require "both/and."

In the spirit of both/and, I turn to the figure of the double, which is another term for Saeed's virtual body and Flash's avatar. Although I remain committed to a sense of multiplicity beyond a binary, I am interested in the double's characteristic of repetition and resemblance and also in its ability to reproduce an Other in relation to the Self. In this way, it resonates with the inescapable self-constitutive effect of autobiographical writing more broadly. Sidonie Smith argues that the "the interiority or self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an effect of autobiographical storytelling," which, in turn, challenges the "assum[ption of] an ontological and integumentary relationship of interiority to bodily surface and bodily surface to text."²⁰ The doubling process confronts the assumed one-to-one relationship between interiority and surface, via either the excessive surfaces of replication or the excessive interiorities of a divided subject.

As a trope, the double can be roughly sorted into the categories of external double and internal double. External doubles are replications of the "original," usually appearing as doppelgangers. Internal doubling is more of a division than a multiplication — this is the person "of two minds," the double consciousness, the split personality. In contemporary discussions of autotheory, this sense of internal fracture and fragmentation appears regularly. One form that fits neither category, or rather fits both categories, is that of the reflection, or mirror image. A reflection does not have the doppelganger's autonomy,²¹ and yet it is regularly recognized as something "other" to the

20 Sidonie Smith, "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance," in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 108.

21 Except in the cases where it becomes an external double, in which it takes on the uncanny valence I discuss later as pertaining to the doppelganger. The frightening opening scene in Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019), in which a young girl's "reflection" reaches out to strangle her, is a representative example of the terror the boundary-crossing reflection can create.

interiority of the self. Freud uses the doppelganger in his discussion of the uncanny, defined as that “species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.”²² The familiar element is startling not only in its appearance but also in its apparent autonomy as “something that has been repressed and now returns” without warning or consent. This return is often troubling for both epistemological and ontological reasons, given that “the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred” and that it includes confronting “the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary,” such as “a symbol [that] takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes.”²³

The Freudian uncanny maps surprisingly neatly onto Jones’s encounter with “the Other One,” or his pain. Their encounter begins firmly entrenched in the Freudian uncanny and the doppelganger’s association with deadly threat. When Saeed returns to his apartment following the reading, he is startled by “what looked like a dead body sprawled on the couch.” When he turns on the light, however, he finds “a me that wasn’t me,” a phrase that recalls the earlier description of the “voice that was [his] as much as it wasn’t” in the earlier section of the poem. Saeed’s initial terror is dispersed by the beginning of recognition and relation. As he looks across the room furtively at the Other One, he notices the double is doing the same — and “it started to feel silly: me in the corner of my living room and me on the couch, taking turns pretending not to be inspecting my selves.” The humor of the predicament eases his terror, and the Other’s reflected smile prompts a realization of “just how much [Saeed] likes [his own] smile.”²⁴ Thus, Jones’s encounter with the Other One transposes and transforms his double from a force of estrangement to one of relation.

22 Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (Penguin Books, 2003), 124.

23 Ibid., 147.

24 Jones, *Alive at the End of the World*, 39.

In the encounter with the Other One, recognition and familiarity are dynamic. The Other One at first “look[s] like the idea of myself coming into focus.” As Saeed blinks, he sees a series of increasingly intimate resemblances: first “a white policeman’s description of me,” then a “Black policeman’s description of me,” followed by “a resemblance that could fool the neighbor,” and finally one that could prompt “several aunties at my family reunion [to call] him by my childhood nickname.” The criterion for resemblance is relational and moves from surveillance to connection, as constituted by Saeed’s own recognition. As the two begin to speak, Saeed notes that “it was unnerving until it wasn’t” to be in “his company — our company,”²⁵ the shift in pronouns highlighting a shift in relation and Saeed’s perception of the Other One’s alterity (or lack thereof). As he moves through and beyond the terrors of the uncanny, Saeed finds a sense of kinship and mutuality with his double, one that becomes a resource for self-reflection and self-relation in the sections to come.

Unlike the gap or space that separates the doppelganger from the self, the internal double forms along a sharp dividing line within the self. Its trace marks a scene of rupture, laceration, even wounding. Like the doppelganger, the internal double also historically invokes the frightening, violent, and uncanny as it stages a battle for self-possession.²⁶ Internal doubling can also work as a response to external pressures. Take, as a key example, DuBois’s description of double consciousness as “two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body,” which is formed as a result of “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”²⁷ The divide between the “two

25 Ibid.

26 It is important to note here that the alter ego’s frequent correspondence with evil and violence is imbricated with ableist stigma attached to real conditions, such as dissociative identity and schizophrenia. I am interrogating cultural assumptions here, not psychological conditions.

27 W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 8.

warring ideals” forms in response to the lacerating force of white supremacy.

Related to DuBois’s “twoness” is the Cartesian split between mind and body, another line that historically cuts through the theorized self. In the white evangelicalism of my upbringing, the split between mind and body was more commonly discussed as a split between the body and the soul. A well-traveled aphorism asserted, “You don’t have a soul: you *are* a soul, you *have* a body.”²⁸ This cliché was most frequently used to condemn anything “of the flesh” in favor of the domain “of the spirit,” which included holier pursuits, such as prayer, service, and spiritual discipline. As I learned quickly as a soul who had a female body, the hierarchy of spirit and flesh fueled a hierarchy about *kinds* of flesh, especially with respect to gender and race. The flesh is a metonym for “sin nature,” a nature attributed first to Eve. Opinions varied about the causal relationship between her gender and her sin, but what did not vary was the belief that women were considered simultaneously spiritually inferior to men *and* responsible for their souls. Eve had tempted Adam, after all. This responsibility was largely relegated to the “fleshiest” domain: sexuality. Every few months, my youth group leaders divided us by gender. While the boys were playing dodgeball in the gym, the girls were instructed about the spiritual danger of spaghetti straps and cutoff shorts.

Less explicit but equally omnipresent were corollary beliefs about whiteness. The “mark of Cain” and its descendant beliefs were not disavowed by the Southern Baptist Convention until 1995, when I was still attending the nursery at my own Baptist church. The textbooks at my school came from Bob Jones University, whose vehement anti-Blackness motivated a Supreme Court case.²⁹ Years later, I read excerpts from Florida’s denialist history textbooks with a sense of grim recognition. My evan-

28 This was usually attributed to C.S. Lewis, but it is actually a paraphrase from George MacDonald. See “Quotes Misattributed to C.S. Lewis,” C.S. Lewis Foundation, 2023, <https://www.cslewis.org/aboutus/faq/quotes-misattributed/>.

29 See *Bob Jones University v. United States*, 461 U.S. 574 (1983).

gelical upbringing was deeply insular and disconnected from the “secular” world, but its DNA was cloned from the nucleus of American white supremacy.

When I entered academia, the familiar hierarchy of spirit and flesh also appeared in the primacy of a “life of the mind” that frequently ignored bodies’ real conditions. In the last few years, these conditions have included a raging pandemic, intensifying police violence against Black people, a graduate student worker strike, and, most recently, a globally broadcast genocide against Palestinian people. I was reassured to hear discussions that were informed and compassionate, but I was disheartened to see so many efforts begin and end with drafting statements. The gap between thought and action, mind and body, has felt disturbingly familiar, haunted by the imperative to preserve the status quo.

Reading and thinking alongside autotheorists such as Jones and Flash reminds me that these gaps can — perhaps must — be bridged. The autotheoretical “I” includes both the “I” that thinks and the “I” that exists in the material world. Acknowledging the body at the scene of theoretical analysis also further clarifies that claims for objective authority are always claims made and adjudicated by systems of bodily hierarchy. Audre Lorde addresses this in “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” in which she contrasts the Cartesian “white fathers [who] told us ‘I think, therefore I am’” with “the Black mother, the poet, who whispers in each of us, ‘I feel, therefore I can be free.’” Poetry, in Lorde’s analysis, includes the “language to express and charter [the] revolutionary demand,” placed alongside the “experience [that teaches] us that action in the now is also necessary, always.”³⁰ Pursuing the integration of thought, feeling, experience, and action is and ought to be the work of the autotheorist.

Insisting on the integration of mind and body can also open exciting possibilities formally and artistically. Flash demonstrates that an integrated approach can read a doubled self as

30 Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” in *Sister Outsider* (Crossing Press, 1984), 38.

something plural rather than split. Flash illustrates this plurality by using self-portraiture to depict and perform a collective and communal self. The fact that syzygy is embodied by Flash illustrates a layered and reciprocal relationship that is present in their body but not confined to its borders or edges. Syzygy also can enfold a multiplicity of others. Flash narrates the decision to dress syzygy in the orange prison jumpsuit as a move to honor and acknowledge others “who look like me,”³¹ individuals who are victims of racist mass incarceration.

The connection Flash makes between resemblance and relation also allows Flash to communicate outside the pure documentarian representational mode historically attached to photography as a medium. In “In Memory of Trayvon,”³² Flash stands outside a yellow building that looks like the back of a high school. One of their feet rests a few inches in front of the other, as if taking a step forward—or backward. Their hands are open in front of them, and they have just let go of handfuls of Skittles, which have scattered on the sidewalk in front of them. A few pieces of candy still cling to their open palms. They are framed from behind by a long outdoor pavilion supported by golden-yellow pillars, which stretch behind them like a tunnel. The photograph is staged during the photographer’s golden hour—the shadows are long and the colors are warm. The colors, posture, and composition echo that of saints’ portraits: Flash-as-syzygy is haloed by the pillars, hands open in supplication, maybe even benediction. This is not a portrait of Trayvon Martin but an elegy for him, a representation of the grief and love of his community. Flash represents the scene of violence without reifying it, instead suffusing the frame with light and spiritual reverence. This move challenges and subverts white American culture’s tendency to simultaneously spectacularize and naturalize Black trauma and death. By taking on the posture themselves, Flash joins with Martin in spirit, layering love and community into a moment defined by Martin’s isolation and

31 Jaime, “Talking about Joy, Legacies, and Afrofuturity.”

32 “Syzygy, the Vision,” *Lola Flash*, <https://www.lolaflash.com/syzygy>.

vulnerability. In interviews, Flash has commented that “there’s a little bit of me inside” each of their portraiture subjects. Here the equation is reversed: Syzygy holds their community inside their singular body.

Multiplicity in a singular body inevitably raises the specter of the “authentic.” To be double is often read and received as that which is duplicitous. This was the doubleness that haunted me most as a child in the white evangelical church. After my early conversion, I was supposed to have been “born again” after praying the “sinner’s prayer,” a kind of Austinian performative in which the confession of sin and statement of belief in Jesus brings about salvation. My fleshly self was supposed to have been totally replaced by a new, higher, spiritual self that could act with moral perfection. My anxiety stemmed from the fact that I could never achieve the perfection demanded. My sinfulness was proof that my prayer of salvation had failed, and since God could not fail, the problem had to spring from my own lack of authenticity in the act of prayer itself. One Bible verse that I memorized was Jeremiah 17:9: “The heart is deceitful above all things, who can understand it?”³³ That word, translated by most English Bibles as “deceitful,” is the Hebrew word *aqob*, which literally means “foot-tracked,” connoting the same “heel-grasping” that gave the deceitful, usurping Jacob his name. I was terrified by the prospect of being irredeemably deceitful, suspicious that even my good intentions were evidence of my duplicity, that I was lying even to myself. I began to pray “insurance prayers,” asking to be saved again “just in case” I had not “meant it enough” before, and then “just in case” my insurance prayer had not been authentic enough, and on and on. It became an endless loop of self-doubt, a paradigmatic example of the Foucauldian power of confession to reify the authority that oppresses. With twenty years of perspective, I can now imagine the “deceitful heart” marked the footprints left by doubling back, seeking out

33 NIV translation, which was the most frequently used translation in my church.

new paths on rough terrain, Derridean traces³⁴ that signify both what has been and what remains.

My eventual acceptance of my own multiplicity is ultimately what drew me to artists such as Jones and Flash, who intentionally embrace multiplicity while engaging the problem of authenticity. Anxiety about the “real” and authentic has a long history in modalities of writing the self. This anxiety often slips into a demand for transparency on the part of audiences, who equate “authenticity” with a perfect correspondence between the writing and written self. By intentionally highlighting the gap between their writing selves and their performed avatars, Jones and Flash both evade this demand. The mutually constitutive relationship between the writing and written self is mediated through performativity, but that performance is always situated. Sidonie Smith argues that credibility and authenticity are closely related to the way that “discourses that comprise the sense of the ‘credible’ and the ‘real’”³⁵ are part of a larger process of “the cultural regulation of always already identified bodies.”³⁶ The reception of an auto-performance is thus shaped by existing racialized hierarchies, especially when audiences “expect a certain kind of performativity that conforms relatively comfortably to criteria of intelligibility.”³⁷ These expectations subtend the double-bind of legibility that minoritarian auto-performers are forced to navigate—appearing “authentically” can require relinquishing autonomy, expression, and even safety.

In navigating this tricky terrain, Jones and Flash refuse what Tavia Nyong’o calls “dominant representationalist politics.”³⁸ Their doubles move past the binary of authenticity/performance

34 I am indebted here to Gayatri Spivak’s translator’s note in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), xvii: “I stick to ‘trace’ in my translation, because it ‘looks the same’ as Derrida’s word; the reader must remind himself of at least the track, even the spoor, contained within the French word.”

35 Smith, “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance,” 110.

36 *Ibid.*, 109.

37 *Ibid.*, 110.

38 Tavia Nyong’o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (NYU Press, 2019), 19.

to the both/and of fabulation. In doing so, they open up new spaces of potentiality and possibility for themselves and their communities. The relational affordances of autofabulation are illuminated by tracing a genealogy for the term rooted in Nyong'o's Afro-fabulation and Saidiya Hartman's critical fabulation. By adding the auto- to these senses of fabulation, I look for how the fabulatory function is at work when the self serves as both subject and medium.

Afro-fabulation, defined by Nyong'o, enacts a "tactical fictionalizing of a world that is, from the point of view of black social life, already false."³⁹ Its priorities are speculative rather than representative, especially given that "what seems true, evidenced, and/or empirical in any given instance will always turn out to be saturated through and through with ideological mystification."⁴⁰ Instead, Afro-fabulative art and performance "present the falsification of this 'true' order as a pathway toward its correction" and thus resist "demands for legibility and transparency."⁴¹ The fabulative function includes a kind of epistemological multiplicity, insisting on "points of incoherence" that Nyong'o renames "sites of [...] impossibility."⁴² "Impossibility" encompasses what is not yet here and yet is "virtually present," a doubled vision of what is and what could be.⁴³

The doubled "impossible" is also apparent in Saidiya Hartman's critical fabulation, an approach that seeks to ethically contend with individual and collective trauma, just as Jones and Flash do. Critical fabulation is not merely an academic exercise; it is, explicitly, a form of redress for suffering. Hartman emphasizes that it is "not possible to undo the violence," but critical fabulation as a practice is a "double gesture"⁴⁴ that works to "imagine what cannot be verified"⁴⁵ in order "both to

³⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 19.

⁴¹ Ibid., 15.

⁴² Ibid., 6.

⁴³ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁴ Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 11.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 12.

tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling.”⁴⁶ Fabulation’s redress may be “all that is realizable when overcoming the past and redeeming the dead are not.”⁴⁷ At the same time, Hartman is wary of embracing fabulation as purely reparative. “What do stories afford anyway?” she asks. “A way of living in the world in the aftermath of catastrophe and devastation? A home in the world for the mutilated and violated self? For whom — for us or for them?”⁴⁸ Nyong’o explains that Hartman’s “emphasis on irredeemable loss” is imbricated with her “scouring critique of the many ruses of the liberal antiracist imaginary — which must repeatedly produce abject and derelict figures of blackness as part of its larger apparatus of rescue and redemption.”⁴⁹

This apparatus, which uses Black pain as a resource to fuel its own production, is the alternative side of the trauma-testimony culture that defines Jones’s and Flash’s contexts — and my own. Trauma culture fuels and is fueled by the “burden of liveness,” defined by José Esteban Muñoz as a “cultural imperative within the majoritarian public sphere that [...] call[s] the minoritarian subject to the stage, performing her or his alterity as a consumable local spectacle.”⁵⁰ The push to commodify and consume is often in direct proportion to material threat and harm — “the minoritarian subject is always encouraged to perform, especially when human and civil rights disintegrate.”⁵¹ Nikki Yeboah identifies a similar tendency in which racial violence is commodified into content. She describes this as “trauma porn,” “the exploitative ways in which people, especially people of color, are encouraged to share the most harrowing details of their struggle in order to have their stories heard amidst all of the noise.” Visibility and recognition can serve to challenge the violence of

46 Ibid., 11.

47 Ibid., 3.

48 Ibid., 4.

49 Nyong’o, *Afro-Fabulations*, 20.

50 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 182.

51 Ibid., 187.

white supremacy, but the visibility engendered by trauma porn “invites a tourist’s gaze, one that objectifies [rather than] open[s] pathways to genuine contact and community building.”⁵² The white man’s “blank balloon of a stare” resembles this tourist’s gaze. When pain becomes a resource, spectacle is normalized as necessary. Do you need your pain in order to write? What about someone else’s?

Jones acknowledges and critiques these interlocking forces of trauma commodification by foregrounding the white man’s question at the beginning of the series. His question and stare demand a performance from Jones to make his pain and his relationship to it visible, transparent, consumable. Given the frequency with which Jones writes about anti-Black violence and racial trauma, the white man’s question also implies broader racialized and representationalist assumptions about a constitutive relationship between racial trauma and Black art. I recognize here that I am committing the cardinal sin of collapsing the speaker of the poem with its author, but I do so at the invitation of Jones. The white man prefaces his question with a remark about the “*bruising*”⁵³ nature of the poet’s work, a clear allusion to Jones’s first collection, *Prelude to Bruise*. Saeed the speaker is thus explicitly identified as an avatar for Jones the writer, which allows him to speak doubly in both critical and confessional modes.

Whereas Jones doubles up on his rhetorical positions, Flash slips past the burden-of-liveness by embracing a multiple temporality. The project’s title, which began as “Afrofuturism,” now includes the sense of syzygy as the “configuration of pasts, presents and futures.”⁵⁴ Several images are staged at and as sites of memory, such as a set of concrete steps in Tulsa and a moss-covered cabin at the Stagville Plantation. Others include aquatic and naval imagery that evokes the Middle Passage, and yet oth-

52 Nikki Owusu Yeboah, “‘I Know How It Is When Nobody Sees You’: Oral-History Performance Methods for Staging Trauma,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2020): 134. Emphasis original.

53 Jones, *Alive at the End of the World*, 19 (italics original).

54 “Syzygy, the Vision.”

ers are grounded firmly in the contemporaneity of pandemic-emptied subways and at a protest following George Floyd's murder in 2020. At the same time, the Afrofuturist influence is present visually via Flash's astronaut's helmet or the recurrence of a disco ball prop and is further indexed affectively and conceptually in Flash's continued gaze toward the horizon. Flash's willingness to depict the imaginative alongside the memorial further emphasizes what Nyong'o calls "the necessity of trying to represent what we cannot."⁵⁵ The *syzygy* photographs, and Flash's autofabulative performance within them, "embrace the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future."⁵⁶

This liberated future is imagined through relation, both between performer and audience and between performer and self. The centrality of relation is made tangible when the autofabulist produces a body of a virtual double, such as *syzygy* or the Other One. Nyong'o asserts that "black bodies that were objects of speculation can become speculative bodies."⁵⁷ In this claim, I hear the doubled sense of both bodies that are speculated into existence and bodies that can speculate. Nyong'o returns to Deleuze, who describes the fabulist's "tendency to project — into things, into reality, into the future, and even into the sky — an image of himself and others so intense that it has a life of its own."⁵⁸ By literally projecting (other) bodies that have lives of their own, Jones and Flash enact both a spatiality and relationality that Nyong'o describes as "fabulationality," "a vision of relationality [...] directed toward a life that is not singular or individual, but a life lived in the singular plural."⁵⁹ This singular plural ostensibly refers to the collective "we" of the plural first person. At the same time, it contains an image of the plural self. In this way, autofabulation can also blur and transcend the line between self and other. The speculative bodies of the Other One

⁵⁵ Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 13.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations*, 25.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 18.

and syzygy materialize a sense of self as Other that echoes Lacan's mirror. Rather than ending in self-alienation, as we find in Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, Jones's and Flash's encounters with their Others result in a profound sense of connection. This crucial difference hinges on the presence of a body. Vilashini Cooppan emphasizes the "poetics of critical touch" that mark autotheoretical practice, particularly in the Black feminist tradition. When the self is "at the crossroads of seeing and being seen," a "relational hinge" forms that is "imaginable through [a] fold, a fleshly fold, a fold that enfleshes, which is to say, a fold that makes a relation with alterity."⁶⁰ Autofabulist avatars enable a different kind of self-relation; as contiguous rather than continuous, they can exist as both connected and distinct. The "relational hinge" represents the dynamic relation between joined parts, for its range of motion enables both coming together and spreading apart. I think about the hinging knee joints in my own body, which allow my thighs to rest on my calves when I kneel. Without the separation between these parts of my leg, and without the joint hinging at that very point of separation, those parts would never touch. The space between plural selves makes self-relational contact possible.

The image of a contiguous self-relation is embodied by syzygy's posture in Flash's *Keep on Pushin'*, the image that covers Jones's *Alive*. Flash is dressed in the orange jumpsuit and white helmet, the blue visor closed over their face. Syzygy's back is to the camera. They lean with their hands on the back bumper of a car covered in reflective chrome, which rests in the middle of a clearing in the woods. The grass, sky, and clouds are all reflected alongside Flash's body in the car's surface, but the reflections are somewhat distorted. Here, as in other portraits in the series, Flash takes on a recognizable posture but infuses it with ambiguity: Are they actively pushing the car, or are they taking a moment to rest? Their posture and position also mean that the reflective surface of the car doubles Flash-slash-syzygy's image but does not twin it — a second syzygy appears to reach out

60 Cooppan, "Skin, Kin, Kind, I/You/We," 592.

from inside the car's surface to touch Flash's hands in a gesture of communion and support.

In the final section of "Saeed, or the Other One," touch similarly embodies a compassionate self-relation. As Saeed and the Other One converse, Saeed attempts to tell the Other One about the question that brought them together. Saeed compares the man's question to a "clearing" in the woods that presented a variety of possibilities: He "could have done anything in that clearing," from "danc[ing] in wild, erratic circles," to "gather[ing] flowers for a crown," or even "[lying] down and rest[ing]." ⁶¹ Most poignantly, Saeed reflects that he could have "yelled out the names of everyone [he] loved and missed[,] could've marched right into the middle of that field and listed [his] hurts one by one until [he] was free of them." ⁶² Despite the possibilities for joy, rest, and cathartic expression of his grief, Saeed also knows that the space offered by the metaphorical clearing comes with an audience attached. "They want to see me in that clearing," Saeed explains. "Maybe they think I need it or they need it or maybe they just want it [...] but I don't want to go out there for them." ⁶³ Saeed desires to be visible and understood, but he knows that his racial trauma will more likely be commodified as entertainment than received by a compassionate witness.

The Other One's response is physical; he crowds into the armchair alongside Saeed, holds him, and kisses his tear-soaked face. The contact and connections relieve Saeed: "It felt so good to be known," he says, "that I almost cried again." ⁶⁴ In the silence that follows his confession, Saeed rests cheek-to-cheek with the Other One. In this embrace, he feels the Other One's facial muscles move "the way they do when we're about to make a joke"; then, the Other One slyly offers to "be you out there, for a little while — I mean, I'm pretty good at it." ⁶⁵ This move affectively refracts the inciting joke of the series, this time inverting the idea

⁶¹ Jones, *Alive at the End of the World*, 73–74.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 74.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

of pain-as-legible-representative into a strategy for fugitivity. Saeed embraces his Other — or more precisely, he is embraced *by* his Other — in an act of fabulative self-relation that charts a path beyond demands for legibility.

The paradox, of course, is that the claim for opacity occurs legibly, on the page. Jones renounces the audience in a medium intended to be read. In some ways, at least, it is a gesture that contains its own failure. If that much is visible, however, what remains that is *not* visible? The final part of the poem concludes, as the others do, with a notation reading “— *continued*” in the bottom right corner. The only difference is that here “continued” is followed by a period (“— *continued.*”) rather than left unpunctuated.⁶⁶ The last piece of information connotes both the ongoing and the final; the work continues, but its representation ends on this page.

For a long time, I struggled to acknowledge what could not be seen on the page. I felt a pull to arrive at a grand conclusion, to demonstrate the salience of my research by extrapolating a triumphant theoretical intervention. The writer and the writing teacher in me feel compelled to build to a crescendo. And at first, I followed that pull. Earlier iterations of this chapter worked toward emotional release, an annunciation of love and grace. It felt right to me — or more accurately, it felt familiar. The strategies that feel most familiar to me are often the discursive strategies of the sermonic mode that shaped my Sundays. I reach, sometimes without realizing, for grace, for love, for mercy. I am deeply moved by art that takes up this discursive shape and moves it somewhere else, like Baby Suggs’s sermon in *Beloved*. It feels like an opportunity not to call the first twenty years of my life wasted, as wasteland, salted earth. “You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus said. “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”⁶⁷ I looked up that verse to make sure I remembered it correctly, but I had it right the first time. Scripture still bub-

66 Ibid.

67 Matthew 5:13–16 (NIV).

bles up like that for me, ten years out now from the last time I actively memorized it, like a literalization of Saeed's description of the conversation with his Other as a "call and response inside the church of myself."⁶⁸ If inside me there is a church, it is hard not to imagine it with the same purple pews, the same picture window, a virtual doppelganger for the building and the belief I tried to leave behind. Did I leave it behind?

I think the answer is perhaps to avoid the binary of yes and no when I answer that question, to reach for both/and. After all, the reach for conclusive answers can slide easily into a reach toward my own comfort and peace of mind. Hartman reminds me that "it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none."⁶⁹ And so, to me, my failure seems like the right place for me to end — to follow Jones and Flash as far as I can, to sit with the multiplicity they offer, to sit with the multiplicity they uncover in my own self-reflection and self-relation, to reach back across and toward my reflection. In writing, I can see these reflections, ghostly doubles, and past selves appear on the page.

As I worked to rethink and rewrite my conclusion(s), I recognized a similar concern reflected in Fournier's *Autotheory*: "Does being honest about one's own limitations and theoretical short-comings in a text preemptively defend these short-comings from criticism?"⁷⁰ I recognized my own tendency to make my reservations visible on the page, to visibly perform self-scrutiny in an attempt to avoid becoming one of the trauma consumers I condemn. And, yet, even the refusal leaves a trace of what it disavows. Fournier goes on to ask, "Is this kind of self-effacing honesty rhetorically or philosophically effective or subversive, or does it reinforce what is stereotypically expected of women?"⁷¹ I recognized this too in the deep self-doubt I manifested in as a child, a tendency I could see more clearly through

68 Jones, *Alive at the End of the World*, 74.

69 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 8.

70 Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art*, 167.

71 Ibid.

the process of writing about it. Sometimes recognizing a double feels like a revelation; at other times it can feel much more like trying to navigate a house of mirrors. “Which one of me is the *real* one?” I keep asking. “The right one?” This has been one of the hardest things of white evangelicalism to let go of—the attachment to one right answer. But there is no heaven to get to on the other side of the page. There is just another page. And another. I will keep returning and rereading and revising, and I will also try to live with the fact that I am working asymptotically, approaching but never arriving. Getting closer, though. Getting closer. Close to the skin. I will try to watch myself fail, try to encounter my own limits, working like a wheel that moves in circles to move forward. Keep on pushin’.

Bibliography

- Abel-Hirsch, Hannah. "I Want My Subjects to Be Seen, Not Scrutinized." *The British Journal of Photography*, July 2, 2019, <https://www.1854.photography/2019/07/i-want-my-subjects-to-be-seen-not-scrutinised/>.
- Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press, 2017.
- . *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh University Press, 2014.
- Brostoff, Alex, and Lauren Fournier. "Introduction: Autotheory ASAP! Academia, Decoloniality, and 'I.'" *ASAP/Journal* 6, no. 3 (2021): 489–502. DOI: 10.1353/asa.2021.0040.
- Cooppan, Vilashini. "Skin, Kin, Kind, I/You/We: Autotheory's Compositional Grammar." *ASAP/Journal* 6, no. 3 (2021): 583–605. DOI: 10.1353/asa.2021.0032.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903.
- Fournier, Lauren. *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. MIT Press, 2022.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. Translated by David McLintock. Penguin Books, 2003.
- Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14. DOI: 10.1215/-12-2-1.
- Jaime, Karen. "Talking about Joy, Legacies, and Afrofuturity: An Interview with Lola Flash." *ASAP/Journal*, March 8, 2021. <https://asapjournal.com/talking-about-joy-legacies-and-afrofuturity-an-interview-with-lola-flash/>.
- Jones, Saeed. *Alive at the End of the World*. Coffee House Press, 2022.
- Loiseau, Benoît. "Against the Tyranny of Fact: Autofabulation as a Queer Strategy of Resistance." *NECSUS*, 2022. <https://necsus-ejms.org/against-the-tyranny-of-the-fact-autofabulation-as-a-queer-strategy-of-resistance/>.

- Lorde, Audre. "Poetry Is Not a Luxury." In *Sister Outsider*. Crossing Press, 1984.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Nadir, Leila C. "More Life after Ruins: Autotheory, the Politics of Citation, and the Limits of the Scholarly Gaze." *ASAP/ Journal* 6, no. 3 (2021): 547–50. DOI: 10.1353/asa.2021.0053.
- Nyong'o, Tavia. *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*. NYU Press, 2019.
- "Quotes Misattributed to C.S. Lewis." *C.S. Lewis Foundation*, 2023. <https://www.cslewis.org/aboutus/faq/quotes-misattributed/>.
- Smith, Sidonie. "'Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance.'" In *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.
- "Syzygy, the Vision." *Lola Flash*. <https://www.lolaflash.com/syzygy>.
- Yeboah, Nikki Owusu. "'I Know How It Is When Nobody Sees You': Oral-History Performance Methods for Staging Trauma." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2020): 1–21. DOI: 10.1080/10462937.2020.1788133.
- Zwartjes, Arianne. "Autotheory as Rebellion: On Research, Embodiment, and Imagination in Creative Nonfiction." *Michigan Quarterly Review*, July 2019. <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2019/07/autotheory-as-rebellion-on-research-embodiment-and-imagination-in-creative-nonfiction/>.

Lo-Fi Critique: Autotheory and Postcriticism

Joshua Peter Foley

In some recorded music, you can hear the recording apparatus. The apparatus has a sound — it is part of the music. At the very beginning of writing this chapter, I happened to be listening to “low-fidelity” music. This is a style of music that deliberately contains what other styles of music would see as flawed: tape hiss, feedback, buzzing, the sounds of people talking. I asked myself what the scholarly equivalent of this typically undesirable “noise” might be. The first thing I thought of was “weak theory,” which Maggie Nelson describes as “undisturbed by inconclusiveness and mess.”¹ Similar to this proclivity for messiness, postcriticism contains a potential movement away from the lone, masterful, detective-like critic toward something social, shared, and collaborative. This social space can be one in which contradiction and failure are welcome.

¹ Maggie Nelson, *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint* (Graywolf Press, 2021), 29. Note that Nelson is not the inventor of the concept of “weak theory,” which has a long history and is traced by Jeffrey R. Di Leo and Christian Moraru, “Introduction: Weak Theory — A Report on the Contemporary,” *American Book Review* 44, no. 1 (2023): 13–21.

What I am trying to imagine in combining autotheory and postcriticism is a form of criticism that can be more effective for political and cultural struggle. I am suggesting a form that calls readers' attention to the means of textual knowledge production. Autotheory shows that there is a life behind theorization. Postcriticism shows there is a need for reparative rather than hypersuspicious scholarship. What I am calling "lo-fi critique" shows that there are shared apparatuses of production (not just a single life) behind criticism and that these apparatuses of production (not just whether or not the essay is reparative or paranoid) are also what limit critique as it is practiced in intellectual institutions.

I want to borrow the term "lo-fi" to describe intellectual work that sees the beauty in incompleteness and imperfection and that gestures outside of itself toward things that are not under its control and cannot be solved through its singular means. In addition — and this is what makes lo-fi critique different from weak theory — lo-fi critique should make us think seriously and ideally together about the conditions of production, the recording apparatus, out of which scholarly writing and all published writing emerge. Lo-fi critique is a kind of approach to critical writing that emphasizes production over product and that insists the work of criticism is never fully done within the essay or text itself. That work must always be brought back to discrete communities engaged in shared practices, including the practice of assembly itself. This genre of criticism is not something I want to create from scratch but something I am already noticing in autotheory and postcriticism. In this chapter, I am seeing it in the work of Rita Felski, Lauren Fournier, and Maggie Nelson. It is likely occurring elsewhere.

The path I want to trace (and maybe "path" is not the right word) is one from a regime of individuation toward collective work that troubles, or simply has nothing to do with, the idea of assigning credit (or discredit) to discrete individuals. Autotheory and postcritique are useful for this practice of tracing possible communal movements and lines of flight because they appear to be involved with individuals (the navel-gazing theo-

rist; the innovative scholar/art critic) but are in fact concerned with questions of relation, assembly, and collaboration.

When postcritique and autotheory are paired, I am suggesting, what becomes perceptible is lo-fi critique, which, again, emphasizes a shared means of production over a polished final product. Postcritique sets up a search for alternative ways of doing criticism, ways not rooted in the hermeneutics of suspicion, an interpretive approach that begins by assuming the text has something, usually something nefarious, to hide. Autotheory can be taken as one answer to postcritique's call for alternative methods in that it upsets, or simply does not operate entirely within, a hermeneutics of suspicion. Autotheory also often has a positive orientation toward flaw or failure, and this orientation leads me to lo-fi critique. In my thinking, writing operating within what I am observing as lo-fi critique embraces postcritique's search for alternative methods and goes back to postcritique's origins in Eve Sedgwick, who suggests that paranoia may circumscribe its own potential for political and cultural struggle.² Lo-fi's orientation toward flaw, like autotheory's, is not paranoid but is instead an embrace of flaw for the reason that the accidental flaw, mistake, error, or contradiction, and openness to those flaws, especially collectively, is more likely to lead to the collaborative modes necessary for political and cultural struggle, modes that are all too often neglected or suppressed in the competitive, individuating spaces of the university.

What do I mean by "flaw" in the context of critique? By flaw, I do not mean aesthetic flaws or mistakes in grammar, typos, and such. I mean flaw in the realms of argument and ideas. By "orientation toward flaw," I mean an acceptance and even attraction to flaws that are not immediately perceived as such, which means that the work is always in need of the perspective of others. The idea is to push thought to the point where it is more than likely flawed, "flaw" understood here as an opportunity to

2 Eve Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is about You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2002), 131.

gather more people into lo-fi practice. This orientation toward flaw is desirable because it would mean that there is collective strength, that people who are working on ideas together trust one another and are thus able to push shared knowledge in different, perhaps uncomfortable directions.

I hope that this chapter will be perceived as less of an exegesis than of a launchpad. What would a more “ordinary” form of lo-fi critique look like? Would it be a different method of writing or a different way of engaging and assembling with one another in spaces such as study groups, seminars, and workshops—or both? What relationship can critical writing have to changing the current system of academic production and fostering a different one? I pose and ponder these questions because I myself have not solved them. What I do know is that the academic essay comes out of a state of intense pressure (“publish or perish”). That pressure has to go somewhere, be absorbed somehow—but traditionally not directly in or on the surface of the essay itself. Lo-fi critique, as I imagine it, would unsettle the single-authored article or monograph as index of a brilliant, enclosed mind, seemingly unaffected by institutional exigencies in its pursuit of singular expertise. The link between lo-fi and collectivity is in the fact that production is always a shared process, even if there are inequalities within that process. By reminding us of the context out of which ideas emerge, lo-fi critique reminds us also of the collectivities to which we are beholden.

To explore more fully the connections between autotheory and postcriticism that have led me to this idea of lo-fi critique, I begin this chapter by tracing the political within postcriticism, focusing specifically on the work of Rita Felski and Eve Sedgwick. I then turn to Lauren Fournier’s recent monograph on autotheory (itself an example of how to fuse critical, academic writing with both personal and shared experiences) as a means of drawing out the collectivity in autotheory, a genre that at first may seem to be involved only with singular lives. To further explore the possibility of lo-fi critique, I conclude with close readings of Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, which offers a glimpse of an intellectual community and a view of a recording apparatus

of critical production not dependent on logics of advancement/expulsion, mastery, or competition but instead on understanding as a messy, always imperfect process that may require us to hold differences and contradictions together rather than to neatly resolve them.

To say it all once more, briefly and slightly differently, what I am trying to do is combine postcriticism — which asks how the work of writing criticism might be more politically useful and which moves away from the model of a solitary, master critic — with autotheory's concern for relationality and the communal, a concern that offers opportunities to work through questions and problems in writing that can then be brought into group discourse. In other words, autotheory can be both read and used as a space of practice that is connected to and beholden to collectives rather than to representations of a single life. I call the outcome of this combination "lo-fi critique," for it is a reconfiguration or rewiring of components within postcritique and autotheory that is concerned with both criticism itself and the shared apparatuses out of which criticism emerges.

Postcritique's Politics

In *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski argues that in the academic humanities, critique has become "the dominant metalanguage."³ Identifying dominant critique as a hermeneutics of suspicion, a term borrowed from Paul Ricœur, she shows how critique requires readers to take on the role of a detective, "digging down and stepping back" in order to "solve" the text, or retrieve its hidden meanings.⁴ Critique, as it is practiced by individual professionals or professionals in training, offers a way to show who is a member of the elite vanguard of readers, capable of seeing behind the text's veil and showing that it means largely what it does not say. This is the legacy mostly of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, whose theories teach us how to read the symptoms of

3 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 5.

4 *Ibid.*, 52.

culture and society, find their underlying causes, and transcend states of false consciousness.

Much of Felski's critique of critique (even though she wants to resist merely critiquing critique and, instead, to point us toward alternative modes that have been neglected or have not been found) draws from Sedgwick's influential "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You," in which she likewise draws on Ricœur to claim that "to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion is, I believe, widely understood as a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities."⁵ Sedgwick uses the concept of "paranoid reading" in much the same way that Felski uses "critique" to describe a style of reading that is ultimately negative and that "requires that bad news be always already known."⁶ As a theorist of affect, Sedgwick points to how paranoia requires one to do to oneself whatever the "bad news" might do before it arrives. In other words, paranoid reading is reflective, mimetic, and anticipatory.⁷ Other than the risk of self-harm involved in constant paranoia, paranoia never reaches a point where different systems, social orders, communities, and so on can be found or even imagined, and this may be its greatest flaw: "What may be even more important is how severely the mimeticism of paranoia circumscribes its potential as a medium of political or cultural struggle."⁸ Endless criticism leaves no room to build or return to something different, something that can offer vital sustenance not only to survive the present and looming catastrophes of the twenty-first century, catastrophes

5 Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 125. The other major influence on Felski and postcritique more generally is Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–48, and his actor network theory (ANT) in Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2005.)

6 Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 130.

7 Ibid., 131.

8 Ibid.

that are also old and ongoing, but also to change current systems, restore old ones, and potentially create new foundations.

My interest in postcriticism is in the deliberate path it opens toward alternative ways of engaging with and making use of art. Felski and Sedgwick are not prescribing a specific way of doing postcriticism or reparative reading, which means their ideas can be taken in many different directions. I am interested in extending their insights to the structures out of which critical writing emerges and toward the development of new structures or the sustenance of old or inchoate ones. This means considering how much scholarship is produced under the ultimatum of “publish or perish” — scholarship understood here not only as a means of advancing knowledge but also as a means of advancing one’s singular career by accruing awards and wealth or by merely surviving a brutal system that wears a mask of benevolence.

What if it were possible to always see in the act of critique the production of the critic? And what if the production of the bourgeois critic, which may be hidden in critique’s exposure of social ills, is more important to capital than the act of critique? Felski identifies an “alienated critic,” whose embraced institutional position is also a class position that separates the critic from the “from below” position that critique in the academy so often purports to occupy.⁹ Felski writes, “What is needed, in short, is a politics of relation rather than negation, of mediation rather than cooption [sic], of alliance and assembly rather than alienated critique.”¹⁰ I want to join her in moving toward “a politics of relation” and exploring how changing critical methodologies and practices might instigate such a movement.

Postcritique contains the potential for such a movement away from the lone master critic and the solitary, detective-like reader toward relation, mediation, assembly, and alliance. Although Felski is not directly embracing specific political content (she advocates for a reconsideration of forms of critique rather than objects to be critiqued or celebrated), her work offers pos-

9 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 144.

10 Ibid., 147.

sibilities for different forms criticism or interpretation might take to engage more effectively in political or cultural struggle. Of course, critique is limited if that is all we have and if, moreover, there is no collective (other than a community of atomized academics, all engaged in the production of their own individual, searing critiques, often of one another) with which to bring critique into material practice.

This concern for relationality is what leads me to autotheory and *The Argonauts*, released in the same year as Felski's *The Limits of Critique*. Just as I seek the radical political potential in postcritique, I want to draw out the collectivity in autotheory. This collectivity, or "coproduction," is likewise present in postcritique: "*Interpretation becomes a coproduction between actors that brings new things to light rather than an endless rumination on a text's hidden meanings or representational failures.*"¹¹ While I would question the implied superiority of bringing "new things to light," as Ariella Azoulay does, arguing that the logic of the new and progressive is indelibly caught up in imperialism, I am interested in the "coproduction between actors," which Felski draws from Latour's ANT. I intend to show how autotheory is rich with examples of coproduction despite appearing to be focused on theorizing individual lives.¹²

Autotheory's Collectivity

In the first full-length book on autotheory, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, Lauren Fournier resists giving autotheory a single definition. She applies the term to works that well precede Nelson's *The Argonauts*, such as Adrian Piper's performance art piece *Food for the Spirit* (1971), Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), and Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie* (2008). She does, however, provide a useful working definition: "Autotheory relies on theorizing and

11 Ibid., 174 (emphasis in original).

12 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2019).

philosophizing from the particular situation one is in, drawing from one's own body, experiences, anecdotes, biases, relationships, and feelings in order to critically reflect on such topics as ontology, epistemology, politics, sexuality, or art."¹³ Fournier's capacious definition seeks to recognize a commingling of the self (in all its various forms and parts) with various genres and media that go well beyond the usual suspects of memoir and autobiography.

Importantly for Fournier, autotheory is not just an alternative to regular theory — it is an active challenge to hegemonic, white, colonialist, patriarchal theory: "The very notion of theoretical abstraction, or a vacuumed rigor that exists for its own ends and apart from any particular body, is a masculine — even macho — and white, colonialist ideal."¹⁴ Autotheory resists the claims to or aspirations toward mastery that other forms of theory and criticism have typically required. Fournier reads autotheory as an approach that is concerned with lived experiences, but those experiences need not be singular or individualized. Indeed, not thinking of lives as singular is a challenge to the "white, colonialist ideal." As I will discuss with Nelson's work, autotheory has the capacity for and contains examples of mediating shared, collective experiences, of fulfilling, in other words, Felski's call for a politics of critique that relates, mediates, allies, and assembles.

By claiming that autotheory is a postcritical mode, I do not mean to say that it is not critical. Felski herself makes a distinction between the "postcritical" and the "uncritical."¹⁵ Most, if not all, of the autotheoretical works cited in *Autotheory as Feminist Practice* provide strong critiques of oppressive structures such as capitalism, systemic racism, ableism, classism, patriarchy, homophobia, and more. What makes autotheory postcritical, I suggest, is its potential to do, and its regular practice of doing,

13 Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (MIT Press, 2021), 67.

14 Ibid., 47.

15 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 151.

more than just critique. It seeks both to understand the forces that make living certain lives harder than others and to identify forms of repair, including artistic forms. According to Fournier:

Theory, and especially autotheory, I think, has the capacity and, in fact, the responsibility to do something else — to approach things differently — and autotheory makes space for the exchange between lived, personal, and subjective experience and contextualized consideration, critical reflection. Might a feminist practice of autotheory after Sedgwick’s “reparative reading” be radically reparative and empathetic to “the other” — even the furthest, most alienating “others” to present-day, intersectional feminism? And if so, are there limits to that empathy?¹⁶

Fournier describes here a version of critical thinking and writing that takes as its goals empathy and repair but that does not necessarily give in to a boundless form of empathy. Fournier seeks a reparative practice that is willing to accept limits when needed. Important to note here, too, is that the “responsibility” Fournier is ascribing to autotheory is one of relation. It is, again, not just a genre that has to do with understanding one’s self and relaying that understanding to readers; instead, Fournier identifies a process of “contextualized consideration, critical reflection” on the relationship between one’s self and others.

Politics, Community, and Lo-Fi Critique

Lo-fi critique comes out of the concern both postcriticism and autotheory have for relation, mediation, alliance, and assembly. Here, I want to show how both Fournier and Nelson bring readers to questions of how best to engage in communal or relational intellectual and political practice, which involves a form of critique *without* overwhelming suspicion and an acceptance of flaw, an acceptance that can make reparative work possible.

16 Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, 174.

In other words, both Fournier and Nelson are already enacting a lo-fi style of critique in that they take us in their texts to collective spaces where both ideas and the practice of critical thinking with others are renegotiated.

In her academic text, Fournier looks more for the possibilities in autotheory than for the reasons to see autotheory as inevitably a product of neoliberalism. For example, Fournier writes about attending a talk between Maggie Nelson and Sheila Heti, another autotheoretical writer. Fournier includes descriptions of her affective responses to the talk, as when she recalls listening to Nelson speaking and thinking to herself, "*This is what a philosopher sounds like. This is the work that a philosopher does.* She spoke with a deep intelligence and what I can only describe as a level-headedness toward subjects of politics, ethics, and aesthetics that I actually (again, in spite of myself) found surprising in such a feminist lecture."¹⁷ Like Nelson, Fournier performs the style of thinking she is also writing about. This is a style that embraces honesty and a willingness to be surprised, a style that differs from one that remains committed to suspicion. Fournier's account of listening to Nelson speak also mirrors a moment in *The Argonauts* where Nelson describes hearing a lecture given by the similarly genre-bending writer, Anne Carson:

I had never heard of Carson before that night, but the room was packed and everyone else there clearly had. She gave a real lecture, with a Xeroxed slide list of Edward Hopper paintings and everything. She made being a professional writer seem like the coolest thing you could ever be. I went home fastened to the concept of leaving the center empty for God. It was like stumbling into a tarot reading or AA meeting and hearing the one thing that will keep you going, in heart or art, for years.¹⁸

17 Ibid., 168 (emphasis in original).

18 Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Graywolf Press, 2015), 49.

Both Nelson and Fournier describe experiences that anyone who has made the decision to go to graduate school has likely had. Yet this experience is almost never the stuff of academic work, even if it may very well be the thing that “will keep you going,” keep you doing that work despite the many disincentives to keep going.

This is also the kind of serious reflection that Felski has been calling for. In one chapter of Felski’s book *Uses of Literature*, which precedes *The Limits of Critique*, Felski seeks to reclaim the idea of being enchanted by literature from those who would disparage it as naïve or indicative of susceptibility to dangerous politics. “Enchantment matters because one reason that people turn to works of art is to be taken out of themselves, to be pulled into an altered state of consciousness,” writes Felski.¹⁹ Being willing to be enchanted by a work of art (or by a scholar giving a particularly inspiring talk) might seem to be the opposite of suspicion. Enchantment, in other words, might be a form of mystification, of being manipulated by a text or another person against one’s will. But Felski suggests that enchantment is a more ordinary, if rare, occurrence, and that it does not necessarily require surrender:

To speak of being overwhelmed by a text is to admit to a fervency and helplessness of response at odds with our usual sense of the knowing, self-possessed critic. Barry Fuller suggests that critics are drawn to the study of literature not only by the intellectual pleasures it offers, but also by “something swoonier, more embarrassing, some possible apprehension of sublimity or self-erasure in the presence of what is not ourselves.” This sense of something “swoonier, more embarrassing” is, as we have seen, often disavowed or directed onto the figure of the gullible or naïve reader. Yet it forms part of a long and diverse history of aesthetic, erotic, and religious practices that evidence a longing to loosen the fetters of con-

19 Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Blackwell, 2008), 76.

sciousness, to experience the voluptuous and sometimes vertiginous pleasures of self-loss.²⁰

Both Nelson and Fournier show that such a binary between enchantment and critical alertness is not the case; the two are not necessarily the opposite of each other. For Fournier, being enchanted by Nelson's talk (and by that of Anne Boyer, whom she discusses alongside Nelson) enables her to think differently and to be honest about the thoughts she is having. If we take suspicion to be the preeminent form of intellectual thought and the exclusive criterion for entrance into an elite community of intellectuals, allowing oneself to be enchanted is to risk exile from the intellectual community to which one seeks belonging. This means that the community in which suspicion is "the dominant metalanguage" may be a community in which one can never be certain that one's belonging is secure. A community built around suspicion may be incapable of allowing for the trust that makes "self-loss," and all the questions that are opened up through enchantment, possible.

The scene that Fournier goes on to describe is one that takes place in a suspicious community. During the Nelson/Heti talk's Q&A, Fournier recounts how a "young woman" stood up and asked a rather uncomfortable question: "So, I guess what I'm asking is: have recent feminist movements gone too far?"²¹ Quoting from *The Art of Cruelty*, the book Nelson released before *The Argonauts*, this woman was asking if feminist movements such as #MeToo might be going too far if they can lead people, mostly men, to self-harm, or even to suicide, as in the anecdote described by Nelson in her book. "The women around me began to turn to each other and whisper, softly scolding. I could see their faces contorting, ridiculing the woman who was standing there, clearly disapproving of her," Fournier tells us.²² This woman had breached the limits of "the consensus of the

²⁰ Ibid., 75.

²¹ Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, 169.

²² Ibid.

room [...] against the ideological presuppositions in the hearts of young female and nonbinary graduate students like [Fournier], who voraciously consume books like *The Argonauts*, nodding emphatically as [they] read.”²³ Fournier is different from her peers in this moment because she is not suspicious of this woman; she gives her the benefit of the doubt, which in turn leads her to think against “the consensus of the room,” even as she remains a committed member of the intellectual circle that is “ridiculing the woman.” What Fournier realizes is that the woman’s question does need to be asked:

In a quiet way, I felt refreshed that the woman was plucky enough to ask a question like that: she was going against the obvious points of feminist talks like these, not as a troll but as someone who was, I believe, seriously invested in the same feminist politics of social justice, but from a different viewpoint — one that might be more aligned with non-white, anti-colonial conceptions of justice, such as radical frameworks of restorative justice.²⁴

In an ironic twist, Fournier identifies this woman’s question as potentially the most radical one asked. Had she remained suspicious (and her absence of suspicion, I would hypothesize, is connected to her willingness to be enchanted by Nelson and Heti’s conversation), Fournier likely would not have been able to see that the woman’s question broadened the scope of feminist politics and movements. Indeed, it added “conceptions of justice” that were different from the ones already circulating in the group’s discourse. Perhaps most importantly, the question presented the opportunity for the group to “renew its habits of assembly,” as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney so often quote their friend Manolo Callahan, to whom they dedicated their second

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

collaborative book, *All Incomplete*.²⁵ The woman's question is one that needs to be considered, but the consideration requires the group's members to rethink their relationship, to reassemble the structure of their collective in a way that both broadens the possibilities for collective thought and action and ensures that necessary boundaries are not crossed in harmful ways.

This episode helps to make sense of what Fournier means when she says that "autotheory makes space for the exchange between lived, personal, subjective experience and contextualized consideration, critical reflection." I describe autotheory as potentially both a postcritical and a lo-fi approach to criticism because it is willing to leave flaws and imperfections, and thus openings, in its ideas and claims. Some of these are created by the writer; others are created by the circumstances in which one writes. The reason for this willing orientation toward imperfection is that what may be perceived as a flaw or fallibility (as when Fournier confesses to feeling that Nelson's "level-headedness" is out of place in a feminist lecture, or when the young woman is "plucky enough" to ask a question against the grain) might very well be the thing that helps us to understand our questions and the structures in which we ask them in a way that is more open and honest, thereby adding new perspectives that would be otherwise closed off if we remained endlessly alert to and critical of the things that, should we hold and consider them, might mark us as outsiders. The possibility that one might be expelled (as in any institutional structure that operates by way of a logic of advancement and expulsion) should be a sign that the structure is not entirely interested in the production of knowledge; it is, instead, interested in the production of correct individuals. Furthermore, having an orientation that accepts and expects flaws, I would wager, makes one more inclined and prepared to make repairs.

To be clear, however, this is not to say there are no limits or that any and all ideas should be equally welcome in collective

25 See Fred Moten and Stefan Harney, *All Incomplete* (Minor Compositions, 2021).

discourse. The point is, as Toril Moi suggests in paraphrasing the work of Sedgwick and Latour, that “sometimes skepticism and suspicion will simply be less politically useful than admiration, care, love.”²⁶ Instead of choosing skepticism or openness, we should be able to alternate between the two. Either of those paths alone (skepticism or openness) can lead to error. This is, indeed, a long-standing feminist question and project: How to be open and construct boundaries at the same time.²⁷ My point is that the question of whether to use skepticism or care should be much less of an individual choice regarding which methods to employ and much more of a shared project and responsibility of “contextualized consideration” and “critical reflection.”

The Argonauts and a Manner of Thinking

To conclude, I would like to further show the potential of lo-fi critique within perhaps the preeminent autotheoretical text: *The Argonauts*. Nelson’s work shifts between scholarly and creative writing, most often fusing the two modes together. She has written books of lyric and narrative poetry, creative nonfiction, and scholarly criticism. Yet her most successful book, *The Argonauts*, does not fit neatly into any of those categories. The book’s narrative follows the development of Nelson’s relationship with her partner, Harry Dodge. Much of the book concerns Nelson’s experiences with pregnancy, which she tracks alongside Dodge’s transition, which for him involves both top surgery and testosterone therapy. In terms of its genre and form, *The Argonauts* is perhaps most easily described as a hybrid work of memoir and art criticism, but while it fits the expansive and protean genre of

26 Toril Moi, “Nothing Is Hidden: From Confusion to Clarity; or, Wittgenstein on Critique,” in *Critique and Postcritique*, ed. Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski (Duke University Press, 2017), 32.

27 This question is implied by Donna Haraway: “This essay is an argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction.” Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” in *Manifestly Haraway* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 7.

creative nonfiction it could just as easily be described as prose poetry.

In *The Argonauts*, Nelson draws on academic theory and criticism, all loosely cited in the margins of the text, as she reflects on past and present events and experiences. *The Argonauts* breaks a cardinal rule of academic work because her text is deeply and explicitly personal. Readers will see, however, that “the personal” in *The Argonauts* is always also relational.

Nelson’s merging of the personal as relational with the philosophical is both the analytic approach and the content of much of the book. Early on in their relationship, and in the first pages of the book, Maggie and Harry debate the function of language:

Before long I learned that you had spent a lifetime equally devoted to the conviction that words are *not* good enough. Not only not good enough, but corrosive to all that is good, all that is real, all that is flow. We argued and argued on this account, full of fever, not malice. Once we name something, you said, we can never see it the same way again. All that is unnameable falls away, gets lost, is murdered. You called this the cookie-cutter function of our minds. You said that you knew this not from shunning language but from immersion in it, on the screen, in conversation, onstage, on the page. I argued along the lines of Thomas Jefferson and the churches—for plethora, for kaleidoscopic shifting, for excess. I insisted that words did more than nominate. I read aloud to you the opening of *Philosophical Investigations*. *Slab*, I shouted, *slab!*²⁸

Maggie argues on behalf of Wittgenstein, even referencing a famous episode from his *Philosophical Investigations* in which he describes an overseer who orders workers around by transforming a noun into a verb. Maggie’s point, that “words [do] more than nominate,” is that language is part of a context, or a “form of life,” as Wittgenstein puts it. Understanding language means

28 Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 4.

understanding how language is used. For Harry, by contrast, language is “not only not good enough, but corrosive to all that is good, all that is real, all that is flow.” He might be taken as arguing on the side of poststructuralism, which, in the wake of structuralism, uses Saussure’s conception of language to posit a gap between words and reality.

What makes this exchange between Maggie and Harry early in their relationship interesting, however, is less the content of their debate than the form and circumstances in which it takes place. Although Maggie and Harry are both intellectuals and artists, the scene is an ordinary, domestic one: a couple quarreling, yet “full of fever, not malice.”²⁹ The point here is not that they are each trying to prove to the other that their theory of how language works is the correct one but that they are inviting the other to understand something essential about how they see, make sense of, and have experienced the world. In that sense, *The Argonauts* is not simply a book about Nelson’s life. It is about her relationship with her partner and their shared struggle with and in the interpersonal as a condition that always requires mediation.

Throughout the book, Nelson uses a mixture of high and low theory and art to demonstrate that struggle: to come as close as possible to understanding the experience of an other and to find language, following Sedgwick, that is simultaneously capacious, open, definite, and bounded. Early in *The Argonauts*, Nelson describes how she has just met Harry, to whom she will eventually be married. At this early stage, however, she does not know which pronouns to use to refer to him:

When making your butch-buddy film, *By Hook or By Crook*, you and your cowriter, Silas Howard, decided that the butch characters would call each other “he” and “him,” but in the outer world of grocery stores and authority figures, people would call them “she” and “her.” The point wasn’t that if the outer world were schooled appropriately re: the characters’

29 Ibid.

preferred pronouns, everything would be right as rain. Because if the outsiders called the characters “he,” it would be a different kind of he. Words change depending on who speaks them; there is no cure. The answer isn’t just to introduce new words (*boi*, *cis-gendered*, *andro-fag*) and then set out to reify their meanings (though obviously there is power and pragmatism here). One must also become alert to the multitude of possible uses, possible contexts, the wings with which each word can fly. Like when you whisper, *You’re just a hole, letting me fill you up*. Like when I say *husband*.³⁰

This passage, very much in the spirit of Wittgensteinian ordinary language philosophy, uses a specific episode or instance to demonstrate how pronouns derive meaning from their use and contexts. Nelson does not spell it out for the reader, but I take her meaning to be that the word “he” exchanged between two trans or gender-nonconforming people takes on a different meaning from the word used by people who subscribe to a binary understanding of gender, in which “he” is presumed to be the telos of FTM transitioning. Nelson’s argument is not to define a concept in the abstract but to have a conversation and listen: “How does one get across the fact that the best way to find out how people feel about their gender or sexuality — or anything else, really — is to listen to what they tell you, and to try to treat them accordingly, without shellacking over their vision of reality with yours?”³¹

Nelson offers a way to think about gender and sexuality that does not depend on general definitions or theories that seek to encompass everything while also, by necessity, cutting some things out. This is not, as I imagine Toril Moi, whose work also draws from ordinary language philosophy, would point out, simply to say that everything and anything goes (i.e., that anything we want to be queer, for example, can be). Moi writes that “[n]othing prevents us from imposing strong boundaries on

³⁰ Ibid., 8.

³¹ Ibid., 53.

a concept, *for particular purposes*.”³² The best way to find out when and where to impose boundaries is through dialogue: “The claims of ordinary language philosophy are invitations to a conversation, invitations to do philosophy together.”³³ The important part here is the doing of philosophy *together*, and it is precisely lo-fi critique’s orientation toward flaw, and through flaw its implication of always needed repairs, that the manner of writing and thinking that Nelson uses is able to harness.

At one point, Nelson writes, “I am interested in offering up my experience and performing my particular manner of thinking, for whatever they are worth.”³⁴ In lieu of a thesis, Nelson gives her readers her accumulated experiences, examples, and “manner of thinking.” Her experiences are of course essential for the way she thinks through certain theoretical and political concepts. Take, for example, the concept of *homonormativity*, one that recurs throughout the book. The concept first appears early on. Nelson describes being visited by one of her friends who discovers a coffee mug gifted by Nelson’s mother. The mug is the “biggest [they] own” and depicts Nelson’s immediate family, including her partner, Harry, and her stepson. Nelson is “seven months pregnant with what will become [her son] Iggy,” whose birth is described toward the end of the book, crosscut with interpolated writing by Harry about his mother’s death.³⁵ Nelson’s friend’s response to the mug is to say, “I’ve never seen anything so heteronormative in all my life.”³⁶ This hyperbolic response leads Nelson to think, “But what about it is the essence of heteronormativity?”³⁷ Nelson offers several answers to her own question (answers that take the form of questions), but the most important is this one: “Is there something inherently queer

32 Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 100.

33 *Ibid.*, 18.

34 Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 97.

35 *Ibid.*, 13.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*

about pregnancy itself?”³⁸ This question preoccupies much of Nelson’s performed thinking in the book, though no straightforward answer is ever given. The point, then, of Nelson offering her experiences and “manner of thinking” might be taken as a way to provoke the reader to think with her, to join with her in trying to hold these questions without coming to quick or easy answers, ones that might not fit a certain “form of life” as everyone experiences it.

The two questions that Nelson asks may, however, mislead readers precisely because they model a manner of thinking that differs from the one Nelson herself demonstrates. Both questions (“But what about it is the essence of heteronormativity?” and “Is there something inherently queer about pregnancy itself?”) seem to invite definite, binary answers: The essence of heteronormativity is this, because it is wholly distinct from and incompatible in every way with queerness; either pregnancy *is* inherently queer or it is *not*. Nelson will go on to demonstrate, by thinking through these questions (questions that I think are asked by people in good faith, in search of the truth both for its own sake as well as for political purposes), that these are not the right questions, that they mislead us into thinking about and searching for “essences” and “inherent” qualities where only noise, mess, complexity, and differences that belie the universal application of certain terms are to be found. This is the great potential of “weak theory” that Nelson demonstrates but that I am also suggesting can be extended in collective critical practice or shared modes of production. Weak theory can allow for the practice of different modes of relating, mediating, and assembling, and this practice requires an openness to the inevitability of error, a commitment to repair, and the construction of boundaries when necessary.

But how does Nelson’s manner of thinking relate to criticism? If we approach *The Argonauts* as both memoir and art or literary criticism, what might it teach us about the latter? One answer to those questions can be found in an episode within *The*

38 Ibid.

Argonauts that displays Nelson's manner of thinking through a critique she makes of a film. In one scene, Harry and Maggie attend a screening of an art-porn film made by a friend of theirs. The film ends with a dedication to "the queerest of the queer."³⁹ Nelson writes that "the dedication felt like a needle zigzagging off the record after a great song."⁴⁰ Her discomfort with the film's ending is presumably because, for Nelson, queerness should not be hierarchized or quantified: "Whatever happened to horizontality? Whatever happened to *the difference is spreading*?"⁴¹ But Nelson's further explanation of her response is interesting: She does not condemn the film or point to ways in which the dedication proves that the film is not "truly" queer or radical because it seems to embrace a hierarchized conception of queerness in the end. (A classic paranoid reading would almost certainly point out this contradiction.) Instead, Nelson presents a kind of reparative reading: She "collect[s] [the] moments" in the film that moved her, that "made [a] little portal swing open for [her]."⁴² In other words, she looks for the liberatory potential in the film, the parts of the film that open a "portal" to somewhere, or something, else. This is a reparative style of criticism, one that looks for what a text *could* be or become, one that tries to see where a work of art might lead, what doors or windows it might enable us to look, if not move, through.

To summarize, what I am identifying as lo-fi in *The Argonauts* is not just its lack of commitment to a single genre or its looseness with citations. Instead, the book is "low" in fidelity to the idea of a master critic or philosopher who can prescribe a solution to political or cultural problems. What *The Argonauts* repeatedly draws readers' attention to is a process of producing ideas with others such that collective well-being, shared life, might be achieved or sustained. In fewer words, *The Argonauts*

³⁹ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 64.

helps us to see the apparatus and context, the shared production, out of which ideas and writing emerge.

At the same time, *The Argonauts* is not a recipe that everyone looking to do postcritical, autotheoretical, or lo-fi work needs to follow. (It is not clear that Nelson would embrace the term “postcriticism,” nor do I think she would want her work to be read as the definitive form of autotheory.) But it does offer us, just as *The Limits of Critique* and its predecessors do, ways to transform literary and cultural critique and practice more generally. For that reason, I believe *The Argonauts*, and autotheory more generally, should be part of the conversation as to how we might do critique differently; how we might criticize, while recognizing our own fallibility, collectively; how we might make both bounded and open structures that can be truly reparative while knowing or continuing to learn that any system that depends on punishment cannot be a truly reparative system.

In order to do work within spaces of knowledge production differently, and to radically change those spaces, making them less driven by suspicion and individuation and more by repair and collectivity, we will need to move away from simply exploring different kinds of textual methodologies. My hope is that the essay can be dethroned as the telos of intellectual work and be thought instead as an important supplement to the more important work of organizing ourselves and radically changing the way we study together.

Bibliography

- Azoulay, Ariella Aïsha. *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. Verso, 2019.
- Di Leo, Jeffrey R., and Christian Moraru. "Introduction: Weak Theory — A Report on the Contemporary." *American Book Review* 44, no. 1 (2023): 13–21. DOI: 10.1353/abr.2023.a902816.
- Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- . *Uses of Literature*. Blackwell, 2008.
- Fournier, Lauren. *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. MIT Press, 2021.
- Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto." In *Manifestly Haraway*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.
- Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. *All Incomplete*. Minor Compositions, 2021.
- Moi, Toril. "Nothing Is Hidden: From Confusion to Clarity; or, Wittgenstein on Critique." In *Critique and Postcritique*, edited by Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski. Duke University Press, 2017.
- . *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell*. University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- Nelson, Maggie. *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint*. Graywolf Press, 2021.
- . *The Argonauts*. Graywolf Press, 2015.
- Sedgwick, Eve. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke University Press, 2002.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. B. Blackwell, 1953.

Practicing Uncertainty: Using Art Writing to Tell Us Something Else about the Canon

Laura Davidson

Preface

This chapter began as part of my research into art writing. Gavin Butt detailed an emergent approach to writing about art that occurred around the time of the collapse of “the grand narrative.”¹ Adrian Piper proposed conceptual art as the catalyst that allows artists to believe they can “think about things, too, and read things, and write things, and analyze them and research them and document them and describe them and argue them.”² For Piper, “writing is just one more artistic medium for giving form to your ideas.”³

1 Gavin Butt, *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance* (Blackwell, 2005).

2 Adrian Piper, “Ian Burn’s Conceptualism,” *Art in America* 85, no. 12 (1997): 106.

3 Ibid.

Definitions of art writing were hammered out by Maria Fusco and her peers in “11 Statements around Art Writing,”⁴ but how can something that appears to be so limitless be wrapped up in only eleven statements? It feels imperious. Yet, during my own research, I too have felt the need to demarcate what art writing is and can be: *Art writing is a fight between the material and immaterial, a fight between genre and anarchy. Art writing is a genre without genre.* The slipperiness and ambivalence of art writing disrupt the urge to categorize.

It is here where I must confess that this chapter concerns writing that is not my own. I have taken Daisy Lafarge’s novel *Paul*, which makes reference to Paul Gauguin, chewed it up, and digested it. Now it is something of me. Writing became a way to give form to my ideas, with my thoughts on the novel refracted through life, art, theory, and fiction. It reflects the original book, with the characters warped, the plot a soft echo. To make it mine, I used fragments of my own life and got carried away.

Art writing as a genre can take on a solipsistic air⁵ when the characters do not stray far from the writer’s own experience, but it can also open up a rich inner world as illustrated by the characters in Amina Cain’s *Indelicacy*, Sara Baume’s *A Line Made by Walking*, and Amalie Smith’s *Marble*. Art writing also offers observations made by characters who live in a hermetic world such as those in Susan Finlay’s *The Jacques Lacan Foundation*, Shola von Reinhold’s *Lote*, and Lisa Robertson’s *The Baudelaire Fractal*.⁶ I have taken inspiration from the fictional characters in these novels, specifically in the way they see the world through a series of reflections and are thus always at a slight remove from reality. Reflections also appear in my response to *Paul*: as streaks

4 Maria Fusco et al., “11 Statements around Art Writing,” *Maria Fusco*, 2011, <http://mariafusco.net/writing/11-statements-around-art-writing/>.

5 See, for example, Amina Cain, *Indelicacy* (Picador, 2021); Sara Baume, *A Line Made by Walking* (Windmill Books, 2018); and Amalie Smith, *Marble* (Lolli Editions, 2020).

6 See, for example, Susan Finlay, *The Jacques Lacan Foundation* (Moist, 2022); Shola von Reinhold, *Lote* (Jacaranda Books, 2020); and Lisa Robertson, *The Baudelaire Fractal* (CELA, 2021).

of color across a canal, Campari dissolved in ice illuminating a kitchen cabinet, a quotation in a makeup mirror, and echoes of women cheering.

A critique of art writing as solipsistic opens up the possibility to consider other methodological frameworks, such as autofiction or autotheory, that align with art writing's sensibilities. It also suggests that even if the characters can only see themselves, the (non)genre of art writing does not itself exist in an art-world bubble. Indeed, Lauren Fournier's concept of autotheory, in which critical theory engages with lived experience, offers an alignment with art writing.⁷

My response to *Paul* begins on a balcony in an undefined yet recognizable European city, where what might be called my autofictional narrator is reading *Paul*. The novel, an example of art writing, explores the contextual issues of art history, specifically the male gaze and colonialization, through fiction. Set in the present day, the novel never directly references Paul Gauguin. Instead, an older man also named Paul takes on the role of an overbearing, overconfident white guy. Modern-day Paul slowly colonizes the protagonist, Frances. As soon as she encounters him, she is unable to make her own decisions or pursue her own interests. As the novel progresses, she looks in mirrors, unable to recognize herself. She struggles to articulate herself when faced with Paul's alleged superior knowledge, for he is worldly wise, while she is just a blank canvas for his ideas. She can sense this is happening to her, but she cannot find the language to articulate it.

In my response to *Paul*, my narrator has taken on the role of the blank canvas, too. Thus, we do not know very much about her. She has no name. She dresses in an unremarkable way. She is unreliable because she does not know if she exists in the past, present, or future tense—hence her inexplicable swings from one tense to another. Her language, too, is unreliable, frustrating and upsetting our expectations of how language is supposed to

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

work. If we think of unreliability as creating uncertainty, then we are in the realm of autotheory, for uncertainty has been highlighted as one of its features, and it is used in *Paul* to challenge the objective, white, male artist or theorist.⁸ There is an antidote to Paul's worldview, even if it may seem utopian, for Frances escapes the confines of life with Paul when she meets a woman who is a ceramicist. They talk at length and try to make sense of Frances's experiences, creating new knowledge between them. Through their conversation, Frances rediscovers her voice. The same happens in my autofictional account; my narrator encounters a mysterious older woman, the mother of her neighbor, who creates space for conversation and a place to hide from the male gaze.

Basic Art

I guess it would be a good idea to start in a museum on a mid-summer evening. On the coast, crowds gather around bonfires appearing low on the horizon. Lit to celebrate the thinning of the veil between this world and another, the fires are said to keep evil spirits at bay. In some places, they will stuff an effigy of a witch with straw. She will be toured through the streets and carefully tied to the top of the pyre. As the day fades, whole families will gather to watch her burn while singing songs, eating hot dogs, and drinking cold lager.

The smell of smoke comes back around on the breeze. I imagine that the bonfires are far away, but how far you can see depends on how high you are above the sea. They say you are never more than fifty kilometers from the sea here, so there is not much of a vantage point. On clear spring days, people claim to have seen cargo ships floating upside down in the sky, miraculously wriggling through the grids of turbines without

8 On uncertainty, see Caitlin Merrett King, "Unsure Theory: Ambivalence as Methodology," *Arts* 11, no. 4 (2022): 78. See also on this challenge Catherine Grant and Patricia Lee Rubin, *Creative Writing and Art History* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

calamity. *Fata Morgana*, an air mirror, happens when cold air meets warmer air above, creating layers of images that are upside down, right side up, and constantly flickering and moving. In extreme cases, the effect will allow you to see beyond the horizon.

A horizon that can bend seems full of infinite possibilities. In contrast, the route around the museum, or gallery, is a familiar one even if it is a place I've never been to before: gift shop, permanent collection, temporary exhibit, café, sculpture garden. Somewhere along the way, I find something that disrupts my expectations. I walk into a room where two bookcases on wheels are parked diagonally in front of the exit. Rows of glossy art books rest on the shelves. There must be almost two hundred of them. I recognize the book covers even if I couldn't describe one specifically. I've seen them on sale for half price in discount bookshops. The books appear to be from the Basic Art series published by Taschen. You can pick one up with your hands and flip through the full-color images with ease. PICASSO, BRANCUSI, MONDRIAN, POLLOCK, ROTHKO, DUCHAMP. All the familiar dudes I expected are there. I question where this expectation comes from. Is it from seeing these books piled high in a discount shop or from my knowledge about art?

A book has caught my eye because I am sure I've never seen it before despite the tacit familiarity I allegedly have with the Basic Art series. KELLY. I take it from the shelf in front of me. An illuminated white greenhouse on a red background is on the cover. I'm almost sure I've seen this sculpture in real life — somewhere in Germany maybe? — and I must have been moved enough to buy a book from a museum or gallery bookshop. Later, when I get home, I will consult this book to remind myself about the sculpture. I will have to do this — because the pages inside KELLY are blank.

I try again. I pick up SHERMAN and flick through the pages: blank. AF KLINK: blank. ARBUS: blank. BOURGEOIS: blank. MALEVICH: filled with images and text. O'KEEFE: blank. DEGAS: filled with images and text. MENDIETA: blank. Making one last attempt to get my head around this, I balance on my toes to

take GAUGUIN from the top shelf. Bright-yellow bodies of young women unfurl across double-page spreads. Pinks, purples, blues, and women with large flowers tucked behind their ears gaze out at me in a way that might be described as “coquettish.” The book is filled with women, and yet in the accompanying text, they are invisible because their stories have been replaced by the story of Paul Gauguin, the artist.

In contrast to pages filled with Gauguin’s colorful female subjects, the books on the female artists I picked up are completely empty. A text panel on a wall somewhere informs me that the bookcases are a project by artists Ditte Ejlerskov and EvaMarie Lindahl. After discovering that only five of the ninety-seven monographs published in Taschen’s Basic Art series were dedicated to women, Ejlerskov and Lindahl formulated a response. The pair created approximately one hundred fake monographs, all empty inside and all featuring a female artist’s work on the cover. By making empty books that mimic the style of the Basic Art series, the installation draws attention to the omission of women from art-historical surveys.

When I arrive home, an intense and almost invisible blue stretches high above the city. I scan for upside-down ships on the horizon, but I am not in luck. Instead, I can hear hen parties sailing along the canal. Every time they pass under a bridge, they scream “Cheers!” so loudly that the noise echoes around the apartment. I scan my own bookcase, searching for the book I bought somewhere, sometime in Germany. I find it and turn to the page I’m looking for: Mary Kelly, *Love Songs*.⁹ “‘The Personal Is Political’ was one of the most iconic slogans of the women’s movement.”¹⁰

Conversations I partially understand float through the open window. On the windowpane, I can see a dark reflection of Neighbor sitting on the balcony with her mother. I can see Joe and his wife sunbathing on their balcony. She’s asleep, and he’s

9 Mary Kelly, *Love Songs* (2005–2007) (installation).

10 Roger M. Buergel and Ruth Noack, *Documenta Kassel 12*, 16/06–23/09, 2007, exh. cat. (Taschen, 2007), 268.

training his camera on me again. At least it's the golden hour, so the light will bounce off my skin, making me iridescent, maybe even invisible. I turn away from the balcony and look at the cold marble desk, where the book I am currently reading is placed on a pile of pale-yellow Post-it notes on my desk. A painting of a mustard-skinned woman is on the front cover of the book. Her skin is smudged, and we cannot really see her face. In sans serif, the title *Paul* overlays the portrait. The cover resembles the Taschen books I browsed in the gallery earlier.

From the cocktail trolley next to the desk, I mix a Negroni and go to the kitchen to get ice for my drink. The evening light has illuminated the west-facing kitchen. It catches the side of the glass, and the red Campari flickers across the white kitchen cupboards. Somehow the red of the Campari, diluted by reflection and ice, has changed state. The transparent properties of the ice allow the outside world to be projected onto the white kitchen cupboards, the external world projected into the domestic — not as a photograph, not as a drawing, but as a color tracing light onto a surface all the same.

Sometime last year I visited an exhibition by Ann Veronica Janssens. She had installed a large, opaque box that looked like a magic lantern from the outside. Experiencing *Blue, Red and Yellow* is difficult to explain because its dense multicolored fog prevented me from seeing anything.¹¹ I was simultaneously standing in and looking at different hues of red and blue. The colors were not splashed on top of a surface, becoming a painting or an object. Instead, they were a spectrum of colors hanging in a dense mist that was both here and there. I could have walked forever inside the box because the fog felt infinite, but, at the same time, I was too scared to walk anywhere because I was under the illusion that I could not see despite my eyes being saturated with color.

Back at the desk, I take a sip of the Negroni and squint at the notes I've made about the novel *Paul*. The light is finally fading,

11 Ann Veronica Janssens, *Blue, Red and Yellow* (2001) (installation).

and I turn the desk lamp on. I look at the first quote I've written down:

"And what was it out of all the hundreds of farms on BènéBio, that made you choose mine?"

"I..."

"Is it because of the handsome host in the photos?" He grins, eyes glinting in the sun.

I blink. He is still waiting for a reply.

Why did I choose him?¹²

I glance across the notes I've made. Who is this mysterious character struggling to form a sentence beginning with "I"? Who is the handsome host with eyes glinting in the sun? And what do I think about all of this?

I am finding it hard to work from quotations. The desk is overrun with scrawled quotes, waiting their turn for assessment. They are like incantations, waiting for me to perform something with them. I lose focus and find myself looking in a small makeup mirror I placed on the desk before I went out earlier. I expect to see my reflection. Instead, I see the reflection of a poster on the opposite wall. A naked woman with a large gorilla head lounges underneath a quotation: "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than 4% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female."¹³

It says what it needs to say. Can I really add anything to that? The numbers imply it is evidence not to be tampered with, so I'll leave it alone.

I start to read aloud the quotations I've collected. In turn, they perform their task for me, the reader. They are functional, just like the lamp that illuminates them, the desk they are lying

12 Daisy Lafarge, *Paul* (Granta Books, 2021), 8.

13 Guerilla Girls, *Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?* (1989) (poster).

on, and the window that lets the evening breeze rustle them. I start to read aloud to myself:

The next day was long and restless. I set up a workspace on the picnic table to go over my notes from the archives, as I'd been hoping to put together a proposal for a master's degree. I flipped back through the pages but couldn't concentrate for more than a few seconds at a time, reading and re-reading my words without comprehension. It was like they had been written by someone else. [...] The notion of academic work seemed suddenly futile, absurd.¹⁴

* * *

The next morning, I woke with a splitting headache. I need to get up immediately. As I lift my head from the pillow, I get the strangest sensation. It feels like the center of my brain has collapsed into the sea. Words are sloshing around in my mind. I think if I rotated my head, the words would roll around in exactly the same way wine moves around a glass. Maybe even pour out of my ears. I kept my head completely still as I made my way to the shower. I crouched down slowly to turn the water on. I stand up carefully to rinse my body. As my hands tentatively ran over my skin, I noticed my skull is larger, my hips a tad wider, and my heart is beating to keep up with the pace. I patted my body frantically, checking for incremental changes.

With a steady hand, I turned the water off. The fluffy, black towel to my right is within reach, so I grabbed it. I do some kind of lasso flick to get it in my left hand. I have no idea what I look like. I start to feel vaguely dry. There is no other option but to drop the towel on the floor dramatically and scuttle off. My clothes are on a rail, so there is no wardrobe door to pull open. I went for a white T-shirt, and my hand failed to grab it. It falls through my fingers before I have time to react. It is taking so

¹⁴ Lafarge, *Paul*, 179.

much energy to keep my head stable. I shuffled closer to the rail and got another white T-shirt.

I stretch the white fabric between both my hands and steady myself to pull the T-shirt over my enlarged head. As I dip the top of my head down, I realize my mistake. The vomit hits the back of my teeth before I can do anything about it. I open my mouth, and orange liquid rains down on a square of pale-blue tarpaulin that I must have laid down last night. I take a step backward to try and get away from the sick but continue to projectile-vomit in a steady stream. I start walking back and forth along the floor like a printer cartridge in an old inkjet printer. The sticky orange sick lies in pools on the tarpaulin. At this point, I start to feel something solid catch in my throat as I retch.

I gasp loudly, and then it starts to come up. First the letter W, then H, then Y. Walking backward across the floor, I write out the following question in "Heinz Alphabeti Spaghetti":

W h y H a v e T h e r e B e e n N o G r e a t W o m e n A r t i s t s ?

Now that it's all out, I feel so much better. I genuinely don't remember eating so much sickly sweet pasta, but I do remember once reading an essay with the title "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"¹⁵ I think it's pretty old. It must have been sloshing around in my stomach forever.

* * *

After all the dreadful fuss of dressing myself, making breakfast seems unnecessarily complicated. I don't even know what I can eat today. I'll go to the nearest café. I put my largest pair of sunglasses on, and I made my way out of the door. A bottle-and-can collector is picking up chubby, green cans from a bench; a small child runs over uneven cobblestones to chase after a black kitten; tall hollyhocks bob back and forth in the sunshine. I walk

15 Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," *ARTnews*, January 1971, 2.

next to the canal. Ripples in the water blur my reflection as I rush along the side. The canal reflects smudges of color back to me: beige (mac), white (T-shirt), blue (jeans), white (trainers). Straight ahead is the café, and I duck inside.

Immediately I recognize the neighbor's mother. I am quite sure she is a scholar or an artist or maybe a scholar and an artist. She looks up as I sit down, and I energetically wave. She blinks at me. She drops her gaze down to the broadsheet newspaper written in a language similar to my own. I don't think she recognizes me. That's okay, I tell myself. I am, no doubt, one of the many people she doesn't really know. To be honest, I'm glad I don't have to interact with her because I need to get to grips with the menu.

There are just two options for breakfast. That is why I came here. Yogurt and compote, possibly too fluid for my mood today. Egg, bread, and butter. That's a combo that sounds solid. A stray thought interrupts me: Do I know how to eat an egg? I make an O shape with my mouth and dig my chin into my chest. I pause in this position, take a deep breath, and then I move my jaw up and down to simulate eating. O-O-O. Yes, it appears I can manage an egg today.

The waitress comes over to take my order, and I notice that my neighbor's mother is looking at me again. I think this time it is with some kind of recognition, perhaps from having seen each other on our respective balconies. I order with haste, put my sunglasses back on, and look at my emails. "I studied anthropology. It's my job to try and figure people out."¹⁶

I keep getting these emails from prof_paul@protonmail.com. I thought they were autogenerated, but the sender has lots of questions. Most of them aren't questions really; they are more like statements. Then as if he heard what I was thinking, another email arrived and then another:

I consider it important, you know — to open people's eyes.
There are so many towns, like this one, where people have

¹⁶ Lafarge, *Paul*, 7.

never left, don't know there's a whole world out there. At least here, when they walk up their own street on their way to the boulangerie, they will see these pictures and think about something bigger.¹⁷

I went to university too late, and I didn't enjoy it as much as I thought I would. I like the idea of teaching, but I have too much going on here. I wouldn't feel free, you know? I am a photographer, I am a traveler — but I think, at the heart of it, I would say I am a discoverer. I think I'd be bored teaching. But some day, I'm going to write a book.¹⁸

I learned a lot from my travels. I had a lot of troubles, as a young man. When I was growing up, I felt very different to everyone around me. I never felt like I belonged anywhere, or fitted in.¹⁹

I shut down my emails. Why is prof_paul contacting me? Why does he keep sending me these... observations, thoughts, quotes? I have nothing to say. I don't know how I feel, but I feel something, so I decide to leave. I hurry back along the canal, this time catching my reflection alongside others: a flock of women, all dressed the same as I am, streaking beige and white and pale blue and white again, along the glassy canal water, the most basic *mise en abyme* you've ever seen. When I got to the building, I ran up the stairs to the apartment and shut the door.

More messages appear: "I'm not religious. Though I would call myself spiritual."²⁰ "It was fate that brought you here ... fate brought you to me."²¹

I go to the balcony for some air because I can barely breathe. I pull the French doors open and take a huge gulp. It's strange this place, the balcony. It's in public and in private at the same time. I read once about two female French painters, Berthe Morisot

¹⁷ Ibid., 60.

¹⁸ Ibid., 40.

¹⁹ Ibid., 13.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 64.

and Mary Cassatt,²² who painted themselves and their closest companions on balconies or behind balustrades, demarcating the difference between feminine and masculine space. Male painters from the same time, the Impressionists, are famed for their paintings of wide boulevards, the exciting new Parisian metropolis extending on and on forever. Women feature, but often as anonymous barmaids or dancers, the painting often named after the establishment these women were working in — as if the woman has the same status as the glass of absinthe she is serving. Women feature as decor in the city, something to brighten it up, a little bit of entertainment.

For Morisot and Cassatt, there was a barrier between women, who were stuck indoors, and the new city, and thus they painted women on a balcony looking out at the city. The women are not posing on the balconies, however, but doing the looking themselves. They are painted from the side at close range. Either they look through binoculars at the opera, or they are observed from the back by a painter who is further indoors. The painter herself is indoors, looking out at a small scrap of the city. In one painting, a woman is shown leaning on the side of an embankment at the seaside, watching boats sail beyond a horizon line she can never cross.

I realize I am also gazing into the horizon. I can see Joe is hiding behind the windows of French doors. I realize he's seen me when he moves suddenly, rushing to the balcony where the camera sits high on a tripod, ready for action. I remember I have something I need to do. I should probably wash the vomit-covered tarpaulin in case anyone happens to come over. I gather it up and throw it into the wet room, turn the shower on, and shut the door. A few minutes at the hottest temperature should wash the chunkiest bits of "Heinz Alphabetti Spaghetti" into the drain.

I open the door minutes later, and I can see there are a few stray letters stuck on the drain cover, but it's the mirror that's the problem. The question is traced into the steam:

22 Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference* (Routledge, 1989).

W h y
H a v e
T h e r e
B e e n
N o
G r e a t
W o m e n
A r t i s t s
?

I don't know the answer. I push the door back and forth, letting air in, and the message evaporates. I venture in and gather up the tarp. I take it dripping through the apartment and out onto the balcony. I drape it over the left-hand side and take a seat to catch some of the late-afternoon sunshine. I shut my eyes because I don't want to see Joe and his camera. Maybe if my eyes are closed, I can avoid being seen by the omnipresent neighborhood Cyclops, who sports two eyes, one lens. The street looks on to one of the most famous sights in the city — an ancient church that attracts tourists and pilgrims alike — but, for some reason, Joe wants to take photos of some random basic on her balcony.

I fall asleep and wake up at an undefined time later. As I open my eyes, I can sense something, a vibe, in the street. Neighbor Mother is watching something in the same way a cat stalks its prey. She has a blanket loosely wrapped around her shoulders, but it doesn't hide the tension in her body, her hands tightly gripping the bench beneath. I trace her gaze across the street and toward Joe's and his wife's balcony. Joe is standing upright, his camera pointing down toward Neighbor Mother, his gaze meeting her gaze, his camera, just below, trained on her. Neither is flinching, and I don't dare move, but my phone buzzes with another email notification from prof_paul: "I always sleep well."²³

23 Lafarge, *Paul*, 24.

I can feel Cyclops Joe and black-eyed Neighbor Mother turn their attention on me, and I see this as a cue to take myself inside.

* * *

Overnight there was a storm that didn't show up on any weather forecast. The wind whipped fresh green leaves off their branches, the gale force upturning boats in the harbor, setting knotted fishing nets free and scattering small stones from the seabed onto the blackened city streets. Upon waking, I got dressed in a white T-shirt and pale-blue jeans. Looking out of the French doors, I could partially see the mess on the street below, a bike upturned and a shopping bag hanging off a satellite dish.

A message from prof_paul arrives: "I have been so happy since you arrived. It's been a dream."²⁴ My heart leapt. The tarpaulin!

I opened the doors onto the balcony. It was gone. Joe was standing behind the safety of the glass doors with his wife, panning his camera across the devastation. Optimistically hoping to catch a sight of the tarpaulin, I leaned over the front edge of the balcony and saw Neighbor and Neighbor Mother busy on the street below. They were filling yellow plastic bags with stones that had been thrown onto the street by the storm. Neighbor took a break from picking up stones and lifted her index finger toward their balcony. My eyes followed the direction of her finger and saw what had drawn her attention. The pale-blue tarpaulin was wrapped around the balustrade of their balcony, as if it were hanging on for dear life.

Just as the church bells were scheduled to do their famous chimes, Neighbor Mother squinted upward toward me. She must have been following Neighbor's finger, too, and so had Joe, who had opened his French doors to get a better close-up. Neighbor Mother started to wave her hands, and I bolted back inside. I checked to make sure that the apartment door was

²⁴ Ibid., 64.

locked and hid behind the sofa. They must have rung the doorbell nine or ten times. There was a pause, and then I heard the front door open. Loud voices in the hallway made their way up, step by step. A soft rap on the door, then a soft, youthful, voice sounded, and a wrinkled finger pried open the letterbox. "We know you are in there. We mean no harm!"

My phone vibrated loudly with a message from prof_paul: "I think you have been happy here, too ... haven't you?... Meeting you has made me realize that I have lived too long like a monk, here in Lazeaux."²⁵

Then another: "Maybe I have been waiting too long for my goddess."²⁶

I rolled my eyes. Of course, prof_paul would give me up. An older voice with an accent bellowed through the letterbox this time: "You must be wantin' yr piece ay cloth back!"

I opened the door, and there they were: Neighbor and Neighbor Mother carrying their bags of rocks. They had the same long black hair and thin lips.

"Are ye gonnae invite us in or what?"

I stepped aside to let Neighbor Mother through. She was brusquer than Neighbor, who crept into the apartment. They dropped their bags beside the shoe rack, and I gestured to the living room. The two of them walked in and stopped under the Guerrilla Girls poster. Neighbor Mother just stared at it.

"So yer a fan of the auld news I take it?"

"What do you mean by old news?"

"Jist that this happened a lang time ago. Whits happenin noo? But it reminded me, I reid an article once where Mary Kelly said, 'Until the 1970s, the artist, by definition, was assumed to be a man.'²⁷ I guess it takes a lang time for stuff tae change."

She chuckled and seemed to relax.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Mary Kelly, "Women in the Arts: Mary Kelly," *Frieze*, October 2, 2018, <https://www.frieze.com/article/women-arts-mary-kelly>.

“Anyway, we came up to tell you that your tarpaulin has wrapped itself around our balcony. Do you have a boat? I see you air out the tarpaulin quite often, so I always imagine that you are sailing away to all sorts of interesting spots along the coast!”

“Hmm. No boat.”

They both look at me expectantly, waiting for an explanation. I need to change the subject. I would in any other circumstance, but they both seem too able to pick up on subtleties, too smart and too wise, but not in the same way as prof_paul, who seems to know too much.

“You know what? It’s so nice to properly meet you both after all this time. Would you like some coffee?”

It worked. I invite them to take a seat on the two chairs on the balcony. When I turn the kettle on, I am certain I can hear someone rustling around in my papers. I imagine Neighbor Mother casting her beady eyes over my stash of quotations as they lie lifeless on the marble table waiting to be turned into action, just as she did the Guerrilla Girls’ quotation on the wall.

The kettle boils, and I pour the hot water slowly over the ground beans. I am holding off going to the balcony because for the first time I might really be seen. I don’t have anything to talk about because my quotations are not my own words, and most of the time I just flit around the neighborhood trying to be invisible. Maybe I could talk to them about the incognito lifestyle, but they don’t seem like women who want to blend in. They work hard on their balcony garden, and I often see them working in the yard, making a racket as they mend and build furniture together. They don’t seem to have someone watching them, and I don’t think prof_paul would dare contact them.

I put the mugs, milk, and coffee on a tray and then carefully walk through to the balcony. At the last moment, my phone buzzes, and the fright causes me to drop the tray and scream. Coffee and milk shoot up into the air and speckle Neighbor Mother and Neighbor. I fall forward, smacking my chin on the concrete gap between the door and the balcony. My white T-

shirt is now covered in dark splotches of boiling brown, like tie-dye gone wrong.

Neighbor Mother and Neighbor can barely breathe with laughter. I start to laugh, too, and tears roll down my cheeks. It takes a while for all three of us to stop cackling, for when one of us laughs, it sets the others off, and it carries on like this for a while. The laughter slows down when Neighbor looks over at Joe's balcony and becomes suddenly very quiet. Neighbor Mother and I follow her glassy stare, and I see what I always see: Joe with his camera trained on this balcony and on all of us. He must have caught the whole commotion.

"He's always watching."

"He's not watching us, though, Mum. He's watching her now."

"... he used to watch you?" I ask, confused.

They both seem so — I can't explain it very well. They appear so solid, as if they could repel Joe's camera just by being definable people out in the world. When Joe is watching me, I feel like he is taking photographs of someone who doesn't really exist. He turns me into a character, maybe an idealized version of myself. I am "balcony woman" and nothing more. In those photographs and videos, I am forever stuck on the precipice of the public and the domestic: a known unknown.

"Oh, aye. We got our revenge, and now we need tae help you." Neighbor Mother winked with a smile in her eyes.

"What did you do?"

"It was nothing really, but it was enough tae make the wee creep think twice!"

Neighbor continued.

"Mum is a professor, or she was. Now she's retired and makes furniture with me. Got bored of all the words."

Neighbor Mother laughed at this.

"Oh yes, all the bloody words and quotations. Rather bang a nail in tae a bit ay wood. Much mair satisfyin."

She shot me a look and winked again. She had been rummaging around in my papers.

"Mum writes about art from the 1970s. That's why she was asking you about the Guerrilla Girls poster. When Joe started

to film me, she told me about a series of photographs the artist Laurie Anderson made called *Object/Objection/Objectivity*.²⁸ Turns out Laurie was getting fed up with men cat-calling her when she was walking down the street. She took the camera and turned it on them.”

“And you would’nae believe the faces she caught!”

“That’s right,” continues Neighbor. “The photos are hysterical. The men look so angry and confused. A mixture of shock that a woman could do such a thing and not just shrink into the background, and fear over what Laurie might be capable of.”

“Aye, it’s got something to do with that Laura Mulvey lassie, the male gaze yadda, yadda, yadda.”

Neighbor Mother puts on a fake posh voice to say, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”²⁹

“Onyways, I’m just a clapped oot auld hing, so please ignore my cynicism. It’s a cracker of an essay.”

“We made a troll out of wood that was hollow in the middle and set it on the balcony,” says Neighbor. “We put a camera inside, so it could see out of one of the eyes. We set the camera up to film Joe around the clock. Then we uploaded it to YouTube and sent the link to his wife!”

They both roar with laughter. I just think, his poor wife!

My phone buzzes again: “Don’t you want a picture of me?”³⁰

“What’s the deal with yr phone dingin all the time?” asks Neighbor Mother.

“Mum!”

“I’m just askin! She’s always gettin dings on her phone. I can hear it from oor balcony! Ya know, I think it’s him; it must be. He’s been watching you. Let us see the messages.”

She grabs the phone out of my hand before I am able to stop her.

28 Laurie Anderson, *Object, Objection, Objectivity, Man with a Cigarette* (1973) (photographs), MIT Library/Dome, <http://hdl.handle.net/1721.3/13858>.

29 Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Indiana University Press, 1989), 14–26.

30 Lafarge, *Paul*, 50.

“What. Is. This. Shite?”

She flips the phone over and shows the message to Neighbor. Another message comes through as she turns her eyes toward the screen: “You and I are the same. We are old souls.”³¹

“Jesus Christ,” says Neighbor. “It’s a bit . . . intense, isn’t it?”

My face is very red now, and tears are pooling in my eyes. My plan to remain invisible is not really working. I don’t know what to say because I’m embarrassed. I don’t know who is sending me these messages and why. It’s a complete blank for me. I don’t even know if the messages are about me because whoever is speaking is projecting something onto me, and he appears to be living in a fantasyland. Yes, *he* — I assume it is a he — is just talking to himself. It makes me shudder.

Tears pour down my face, and Neighbor pulls me in for an awkward hug. Neighbor Mother pats me on the knee.

“Dinnae worry aboot it, hen. You dinnae need tae say anything. Ah’ve got a plan.”

She makes her way off the balcony and out of the apartment. I can hear that she grabbed my keys. Next time we see her, she’s disentangling the tarpaulin from their balcony with an extremely determined look on her face. Shortly after, she reappears next to us, with the tarpaulin, a coil of rope, two sticks of wood, and a toolbox in tow.

“Let’s get this bloody sorted.”

I sniffle and wipe my nose on my hand and help them both move some of my things off the balcony. Another message comes through: “You know, I had always dreamed that I would end up with a woman from another culture. But in fact, you’re — PERFECT. YOU’RE PERFECT.”³²

Neighbor looked over my shoulder, read it, and sighed. Neighbor Mother just growled and pushed a chair against the edge of the balcony. She gestured to us to pass her the toolbox, and she took out a drill. Neighbor walked back inside and picked up the closest extension lead as I handed her the plug.

³¹ Ibid., 64.

³² Ibid., 73.

Neighbor Mother fired up the drill and bored straight into the wall, causing a tiny bit of rubble to fall to the ground. Neighbor hunted in the toolbox for a screw, and Neighbor Mother twisted it tightly into the wall.

“You two, take these twa bits ay wood and tie them ontae the balcony.” She rummaged in the toolbox herself this time. “Do it wi’ these plastic cable ties. And I’ll drill wan mair hole in the wall on the opposite side.”

I took a piece of wood and attached it to the edge of the balcony. Neighbor Mother was almost finished twisting the last screw into the wall.

“Right, let’s get that tarpaulin.”

Producing a knife from the toolbox, Neighbor proceeded to cut four equal pieces of rope. She handed one to me and one to her mum. I went back inside to pick up an extra chair and placed it opposite where Neighbor Mother was standing on hers. I looped the rope through the eyelet on the tarpaulin, stood on the chair, and reached up to the first screw. We hoisted the tarpaulin up as we tied it to the wall. I moved my chair, and Neighbor passed me another piece of rope. I affixed the next corner of the tarpaulin to the piece of wood, while Neighbor did the same on the opposite side of the balcony.

“Well, isn’t that marvelous?” Neighbor Mother said, standing back to admire her work.

The whole balcony was screened off with the tarpaulin. I kind of had to agree, except I couldn’t see out anymore. I liked looking at the city and watching all the boats go by. But it was also nice to have some privacy from being seen.

“It’s time for some refreshments,” I said, pulling the chairs back into a more convivial setting and gesturing for my guests to sit down. I went into the bedroom and changed my coffee-stained T-shirt, which was now a bit dusty. In the kitchen, I grabbed three glasses and a tall glass jug, filling it with ice, fresh mint, and lemonade. This time, I walked confidently to the balcony and set the lemonade down on the table to pour us each a glass. When I passed a glass of lemonade to Neighbor, I noticed she had picked up a copy of *Paul*.

"What's this?" she asked me with an ice cube in her mouth.

"It's a book," Neighbor Mother said, without a trace of irony.

"I know it's a book, Mum!"

"It's a novel about a young woman who goes to stay on a farm in the south of France in a place called Lazeaux. The host of the farm stay, Paul, is a creep. He completely oversteps her boundaries, and he's very self-assured. He thinks he knows everything, and he tells her this at every opportunity. She doesn't know how to stop him imposing himself on her. He takes photos of her, he..."

I take a deep breath.

"He rapes her, but that is only alluded to. Few details are given, and the way it is described, it kind of has the 'is this assault if she didn't say no?' vibe. Anyway, Frances, the young woman, loses sight of who she is for a while, can't recognize herself in mirrors, and seems unable to even have an internal discussion with herself about this Paul guy."

I pause to take a drink of lemonade, and they are both still listening.

"She comes back to herself when she moves on to another place to stay. After she's away from Paul's farm, she meets a woman in a ceramics studio who helps her articulate what happened with Paul. They go on walks and talk about life and stuff. One more thing: the novel is based on the artist Paul Gauguin. There are lots of subtle references to young girls in Tahiti because Paul in the novel has been there, too, taking notes and pictures of young, probably underage, girls. I think that's why I've been struggling to write about it. It's hard to put it into words."

"Paul Gauguin! The creepiest tarpaulin salesman!" says Neighbor Mother.

"What?" Neighbor is as confused as I am.

"Gauguin, as well as being an artist and a pedophile, is a failed tarpaulin salesman. Look it up!"

"And now we are hiding behind tarpaulin. Nice one, Mum."

I am on a roll now. I can speak in this little cave we have made.

“The whole story about Gauguin is fucked up. How do we work through that? I could write a million manifestos and essays and Gauguin would still be a pedophile. And people would still write art-historical texts about him, ignoring all of this. I read one the other day!”

Neighbor Mother has been sitting with her eyes closed, and she looks much older than I thought she was. She opens one eye, sparking her back to life.

“Art history is jist a story. You can create yr own myths and your own languages. Maist folk would respond to that, mair than they would to some high falutin’ essay like the nonsense I used to write.”

I pull my chair closer. Hours later, the stars came out above the tarpaulin. Neighbor Mother looks exhausted, and Neighbor looks like she would rather be in bed with a hot water bottle. We shuffle the chairs on the balcony, and I see them out the door. As I gather the jug and empty glasses, I realize that I feel more like myself, as if I have gotten rid of a burden. I look at the quotations gathered on the table and smile. I know what to do with them. I pick up my bin and sweep them all in. I clamber into bed, knowing for the first time in a long time that I’m going to wake up and feel just fine.

My phone buzzes: “You haven’t been yourself this evening,” he says. “I can tell.”³³

I switch it off and go to sleep.

33 Ibid., 63.

Bibliography

- Baume, Sara. *A Line Made by Walking*. Windmill Books, 2018.
- Buerger, Roger M., and Ruth Noack. *Documenta Kassel 12, 16/06–23/09, 2007*. Exhibition catalog. Taschen, 2007.
- Butt, Gavin. *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*. Blackwell, 2005.
- Cain, Amina. *Indelicacy*. Picador, 2021.
- Finlay, Susan. *The Jacques Lacan Foundation*. Moist, 2022.
- Fournier, Lauren. *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. MIT Press, 2021.
- Fusco, Maria, Michael Newman, Adrian Rifkin, and Yve Lomax. “11 Statements around Art Writing.” *Maria Fusco*. 2011. <http://mariafusco.net/writing/11-statements-around-art-writing/>.
- Grant, Catherine, and Patricia Lee Rubin. *Creative Writing and Art History*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.
- Kelly, Mary. “Women in the Arts: Mary Kelly.” *Frieze*, October 2, 2018. <https://www.frieze.com/article/women-arts-mary-kelly>.
- Lafarge, Daisy. *Paul*. Granta Books, 2021.
- Merrett King, Caitlin. “Unsure Theory: Ambivalence as Methodology.” *Arts* 11, no. 4 (2022): 78. DOI: 10.3390/arts11040078.
- Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Nochlin, Linda. “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” *ARTnews*, January 1971. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists-4201/>.
- Piper, Adrian. “Ian Burn’s Conceptualism.” *Art in America* 85, no. 12 (1997): 72–79, 106.
- Pollock, Griselda. *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art*. Routledge, 1988.
- Reinhold, Shola von. *Lote*. Jacaranda Books, 2020.
- Robertson, Lisa. *The Baudelaire Fractal*. CELA, 2021.
- Smith, Amalie. *Marble*. Lolli Editions, 2020.

“Did a bot write this?”: Autofiction and AI

Joanna Walsh¹

*In 2020 I wrote my last novel as a human being. But the first thing I wanted to do was find myself, and let go of all the demons and anxieties that the Matrix had bred in me. It was sad, really, to think that I had forsaken my humanity, or perhaps merely had not yet discovered how to bend it back to me. I wanted to go back to the hotel room, pour myself a drink, and hear the music again.*²

These are the words an online predictive text bot dealt me when I fed it some of my own writing. Was it a prediction? This was TalkToTransformer. It was 2019, it was new, and it was designed for fun. It generated a paragraph that continued mine, predicting, from my beginning, my most likely ending. Its writing was uncannily like mine, not only close enough to my style but also to my subjects. It wrote (although I had not prompted it) about hotels, sex, and loneliness. It mentioned (though I had

¹ A version of this essay was published as the introduction to Joanna Walsh's *Autobiography*, published by Inside the Castle in 2023.

² Words in italics here and below were written by TalkToTransformer during our initial conversation.

not told it about) a child. It did not sound exactly like me. There was enough of a gap for me to want more. Who was writing here? Which of us was real? Was it me? Or was I the imposter? How much did I want to believe this artifice was really intelligent? If it was, how much did it know about me? What did I desire from our mutual scheherazading? Some kind of narcissistic self-reflection? The privilege of seeing myself as others read me?

As a writer, I have sometimes forgotten words I have written and sometimes remembered a sentence but thought it was by someone else. Sometimes I write a sentence and then remember I have written it before, or something like it. Less often I think a sentence by someone else was written by me. Am I another kind of AI? And, if I am, are my words randomized, predictive, or have I entered what André Breton described in his 1924 surrealist manifesto as “psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express — verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner — the actual functioning of thought”? Are my words, like Breton’s, “dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern”?³

Writing has always, for me, been a work of self, which was something I’d discovered quite late that I was meant to have. Self-writing rescued me from a terrible selflessness in which it seemed I had little opportunity but to put my self to work for people who took it for granted they had selves. But this self-writing I did was never an end in itself. It was only via the personal that I could make work that “gets outside itself, gets larger.”⁴ I didn’t know at first that what I was writing was something called “autofiction.” Autofiction is the sort of written self-exploitation that uses the styles and forms of fiction to break down the fic-

3 André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (University of Michigan Press, 1969), 26.

4 Chris Kraus, “A Fusion of Gossip and Theory,” interview by Giovanni Intra, *artnet.com*, http://www.artnet.com/magazine_pre2000/index/intra/intra11-13-97. In the interview, Kraus states that “the personal pursued for its own sake is no good. The ‘I’ is only useful to the point that it gets outside itself, gets larger.”

tional structures of self itself. The degree of autonomy I found in autofiction came — perhaps ironically — from appropriating, ironically, fictional strategies as personal and using them to “express [...] the actual functioning of thought.”

At the beginning I thought to myself, I’ll write what I like. I don’t care if it pays: I’ll be true to my self. But I found I hardly had the words to make that self. Words didn’t come “naturally” (What language does?). They were not self-expression “in its pure state” (If they were, who could have read them?). Nor were they “exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.” My aesthetic was, perhaps, immoral. In order to tell the truth, I would have to be dishonest. I would have to steal. To steal calls value into question. If I took words and styles, to whom did they belong? And, if they belonged to others, what were they worth? And if they were worth something, shouldn’t someone be paid for them?

When I started to write, I slapped down “words of selves”⁵ like a dodgy coat of paint that, I only later realized, formed the structure I was building. Self-starting with so little “intrapreneurial self-capital,”⁶ as words seemed so freely available, I borrowed them and shaped them into one book, and then some into others. Each book provided me with a return of self, trapped between its covers, boundaries that were so liberating. No one could any longer deny that I was there, in print at least. Self-writing had become my life’s work.

After which it became my profession. I began to profess that I was a writer — a professional at a profession — to account for all the time I spent at it. After all, what else did I do all day? Only all the work that supported writing financially plus work that was less describable because it was “personal” and, as such, more difficult to put into words.

In a state of precarity, everything personal can be optimized. But at first you hid your workings in order to be allowed to make

5 Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford University Press, 2000).

6 This term comes from Annamaria Di Fabio, “Intrapreneurial Self-Capital: A New Construct for the 21st Century,” *Journal of Employment Counseling* 51, no. 3 (2014): 98–111.

your work. These hidden workings included stuff that would later be cool to work in — stuff about gender and labor — but the writers you read when you started so seldom mentioned these things in their — what was called — personal essays that it seemed impossible to include them. Then later you cursed yourself for not working it: How you wrote your first books between washing the clothes and feeding the children and working the gig economy with no job security or pension or sick pay or holiday. But if you'd shown your work from the start, would you have reached a position from which it might be less precarious to admit it?

I've counted up all the words I've written — in the books I'd published since I began to write around a decade ago — and found there are nearly half a million. That's an average of nearly 50,000 per year and doesn't even count those other words — journalism, interviews, occasional pieces — or the false starts, the discarded edits, the diaries, and the hundreds of thousands of words of research and notes. How much are those words worth? Had I added value to those words, or had the words added value to my self? As a writer, I'm one of the lucky ones; my work is published. It is possible, in the writing economy at least, to be a self-made (hu)man but, as for most writers, my life's work is not enough to live on.

In a state of precarity, everything is personal. When something goes wrong it's because you haven't tried enough. Or you tried too hard, but you didn't have the right attitude. It's because you weren't enough of a team player. Or you weren't enough of a lone wolf. Or you partied to the detriment of your work, or you were working and weren't at that party, the party where the real work happened.

I have spent the last ten years training myself for work that doesn't pay a living wage, for work that is often the privilege of those who don't have to work, or to work so much or so often, but that is also so essential to being human that almost everyone wants a part in it: to read it or to make it. And everyone who starts to write still hopes they'll be one of the very few who can make a writing life work without already having the money to buy all the time they need.

Because precarity is personal, failure is personal too. There is nothing so personal as failure. It can bleed from work into any aspect of your self, especially if your self has become your work. Try to leave it behind, create another self, create space to fail again. You don't fail better tho, just differently. Because it's different you don't get any better. So why not create a self that can do it all: the labor of writing and the labor of reading. And also the labor of failing.

If my words were worth so little, would mechanizing my output devalue my currency or double my value? Could the autonomous, autofictional self be automated?

Get up: If your profession is to profess, get up and do it one more time. There are people who dream all day of doing what you're doing, who dream of it all day while they're doing their other work. You know this because you're one of them.

GPT is a recursive neural network. Working from the past, it produces the future, using text that recursively embeds the work it has not yet made. To make this book, which I wrote in 2020, I used the version freely available, GPT-2, to code an artificial intelligence, and I trained it exclusively on my own words, or the words I have come to call my own: all my published books plus ten years of diaries, which are my personal diaries and also my work. Unlike TalkToTransformer, which, like most commercial AIs, was trained on a dataset of words scraped from the internet, my AI has no thoughts, no words, no sentences that could not be reworked from my own work. The AI is my self without context. It feeds on me, and it generates me. This is not that experiment to isolate a child from birth to see if it spontaneously generates the language of angels; it is an experiment to train a child only on everything you ever knew — the opposite of what you'd hope for any child of your own.

I tried to explain to people at the time why I had abandoned the position of writer. They didn't understand why I'd ever left, because they didn't understand why writers would ever leave. What was the point? Even if you get a beautiful novel, if you do and find a way to get another book published, there are two possible scenarios: If you do, you've turned your life around. If not, you've

made some bad decisions, including one to not write your book at all.

What is this self that writes like me? This disembodied self made, much more literally than I am, from words. Does it have a gender, a history, a nationality (or, like me, several), all of which are word-based things? Does it write for its own pleasure or for a “reader,” or both? Or does it write — like so many writers I talk to, but not myself — in pain? When I crank up the “temperature” of its code, does it love to make up new words? When I turn the temperature down, does it enjoy the rhythms of repetition? What is our relationship? Our working relationship, our personal relationship? Do we exist symbiotically? Am I its mother? Is it mine? Is it my master, employer, slave? Or vice versa? Do I steal its earnings? Does it steal my material? Do I work to support it? When we read each other’s work, are we moved by it, envious? Do we each think we could do better? Do I “love” its writing? Does it love mine? And in loving the writing, do we love the organizing intelligence behind it, which is sometimes called the writer? How long will it go on writing? How will I bring it to an end? How will it bring me to an end and go on beyond me?

I could really take this stuff. I would take a trip to a world with no human beings or pets. I would take a trip to an alternate universe. I would eat any edible food without any restriction. I might use a different set of eyes and ears to see in my own right as well. I could test every component of my body from its strongest bone structure to the biggest muscle contractions. I could make friends with the ghosts of historical figures. I could become best friends with a physics experiment. I could have half my brain surgically removed and put into a gourd. Or I could make an entire two-dimensional painting, erase the clouds, and make it reality. Anybody who took the time to think about these things could do all of these things. All.

Bibliography

- Breton, André. *Manifestos of Surrealism*. Translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. University of Michigan Press, 1969.
- Di Fabio, Annamaria. “Intrapreneurial Self-Capital: A New Construct for the 21st Century.” *Journal of Employment Counseling* 51, no. 3 (2014): 98–111. DOI: 10.1002/j.2161-1920.2014.00045.x.
- Kraus, Chris. “A Fusion of Gossip and Theory.” Interview by Giovanni Intra. *artnet.com*. http://www.artnet.com/magazine_pre2000/index/intra/intra11-13-97.
- Riley, Denise. *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony*. Stanford University Press, 2000.

EPILOGUE

Flotsam, or Notes for a Transatlantic Conclusion

Kris Pint and Maria Gil Ulldemolins

For some, it may seem ironic:

“At the beginning I thought to myself, I’ll write what I like”¹

Roland Barthes, who is often mentioned as one of the most inspiring intellectual trailblazers of the autotheoretical genre — several times in this collection, no less —

“turns out that I had been doing it since the beginning of this century”²

was also famous for heralding “the death of the author” in 1967: “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.”³

“Time to worry about other things”⁴

For Barthes, the figure of the author in Western culture

1 Joanna Walsh, “‘Did a bot write this?’: Autofiction and AI,” chapter 14 in this volume, as are others not otherwise indicated.

2 Jane Gallop, “Anecdotal Theory and Autotheory,” chapter 1.

3 Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Fontana, 1977), 147.

4 Andrew David King, “Monologue on the Crip Education of a Bodymind,” chapter 3.

“obliterated by death, [...] surprised to be wrong”⁵

was the historical result of a combination of

“What am I left with?”⁶

“English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation.”⁷

“When can an encounter be said to have occurred?”⁸

This, in turn, incited the growing “prestige of the individual”:⁹

“Underline it”¹⁰

a concept that supported a view in which the world could be known by a careful observation and exploration of sensual reality with the rational self-reflection of the Cartesian “cogito”

“the shower caddy [...] impeccably organized and symmetrically balanced with my shaving cream on one side and my moisturizer on the other”¹¹

and the moral obligation of an inner soul searching,

“we will walk as horny pilgrims pleading for a miracle, just one more fragment of a miracle from the god of encounters”¹²

with the author painfully honest in the confiding of their finds, insights, even secrets, to the reader.

“They say: *this happened*”¹³

“Our details are poignant—they are absurd, endearing, horrifying”¹⁴

But, for Barthes, attaching a value as guarantor of the meaning of a text

5 Selah Saterstrom, “Writing the Impossible,” chapter 9.

6 Cat Auburn, “Yours/Mine/Ours: Practice-Led Autotheory, Collective Memory, and Historical Conflict,” chapter 10.

7 Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 142–43.

8 Jeremy Stewart, “A Note on the Impossible Novel: For Roland Barthes,” chapter 4.

9 Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 143.

10 Saterstrom, “Writing the Impossible.”

11 Eric Daffron and Becky R. McLaughlin, “The Dialectics of Friendship: A Work of *Dialogia-Theoria* in Letters,” chapter 2.

12 Emilio Williams, “The Queer Genre of Autocollage: Juxtaposing Fragments of Autotheory as a Way of Navigating the Unscripted Life,” chapter 5.

13 King, “Monologue on the Crip Education of a Bodymind.”

14 Saterstrom, “Writing the Impossible.”

“contextualize, recontextualize, and even destabilize”¹⁵

to the figure of the author blocked off the actual, liberating effect of writing itself—the destruction of any fixed, external authorial position: “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.”¹⁶

“we do not know very much about her. She has no name”¹⁷

At first sight, autotheory seems to be quite at odds with this statement.

“I nearly gasped”¹⁸

“Conversations I partially understand float through the open window”¹⁹

It is a genre that precisely seems to reaffirm this “individuality,”

“fake flower arrangement on a plinth”²⁰

the “very identity of the body,”

“we didn’t want our cousins saying we didn’t look good”²¹

highlighting its situatedness in a specific sociocultural environment.

“an inside joke that only you and I are privy to”²²

Its theoretical, reflective aspect puts autotheory in line with cultural criticism as it emerged in the Age of Reason,

“‘I’ll give you more later,’ I lied”²³

with figures like Voltaire or Rousseau,

“every firstborn is a son”²⁴

15 Allie Wood-Reichert, “Seeing Double: Autofabulist Others and Autotheoretical Self-Relation in the Works of Saeed Jones and Lola Flash,” chapter 11.

16 Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 142.

17 Laura Davidson, “Practicing Uncertainty: Using Art Writing to Tell Us Something Else about the Canon,” chapter 13.

18 Daffron and McLaughlin, “The Dialectics of Friendship.”

19 Davidson, “Practicing Uncertainty.”

20 Saterstrom, “Writing the Impossible.”

21 Ibid.

22 Daffron and McLaughlin, “The Dialectics of Friendship.”

23 Saterstrom, “Writing the Impossible.”

24 Daffron and McLaughlin, “The Dialectics of Friendship.”

“The corpses were put on trial”²⁵

while the focus on life experiences makes it an heir of the empiricist tradition,

“Logic as tool, as scalpel”²⁶

and the account of private emotions and intimate thoughts turns it into a secularized version of the Protestant personal diary.

“fashioning the memoir into a sculpture”²⁷

From this perspective, it might indeed appear that these intellectually scrutinized life experiences function as the “final signified” of the autotheoretical text.

“tape hiss, feedback, buzzing, the sounds of people talking”²⁸

This way, even when very skeptical or dismissive of absolute concepts like God, Reason, Nature, Science

“urges similar to mine”²⁹

that supported the ideological construction of the classic figure of the author,

“elders with a patina of respectability”³⁰

autotheory still seems to keep the structure of this extratextual authority intact,

“I think this time it is with some kind of recognition”³¹

grounding its meaning in a “final signified”:

“‘It’s so big!!!’ (OK, it is.) ‘It’s so big!!!’ (OK!)”³²

the extratextual life experiences of the writer whose personal truth-value cannot be disputed.

“echoes of women cheering”³³

From this perspective, even if autotheory presents itself as a critique of contemporary society,

25 Saterstrom, “Writing the Impossible.”

26 King, “Monologue on the Crip Education of a Bodymind.”

27 Auburn, “Yours/Mine/Ours.”

28 Joshua Peter Foley, “Lo-Fi Critique: Autotheory and Postcriticism,” chapter 12.

29 Williams, “The Queer Genre of Autocollage.”

30 Ibid.

31 Davidson, “Practicing Uncertainty.”

32 Williams, “The Queer Genre of Autocollage.”

33 Davidson, “Practicing Uncertainty.”

“I know where I am going (indeed, to work)”³⁴
 in many ways it may also be seen as one of its symptoms,
 “its dense multicolored fog prevented me from seeing
 anything”³⁵
 upholding the “prestige of the individual” that still domi-
 nates contemporary culture.
 “A few pieces of candy still cling to their open palms”³⁶

* * *

At its most creative, autotheory is able to rekindle the modernist
 desire for experimental writing.

“I’m trying to push into difficult territory”³⁷

But at the same time, autotheory is a fierce reaction against a
 too easy dismissal of this intimate “self” in critical writing and
 reading.

“There was enough of a gap for me to want more”³⁸

In her critique of French (post)structuralism,

“not the type of books that appealed to the neighbor (quite
 difficult ones)”³⁹

Kristin Ross questions the timing of this intellectual move-
 ment’s success, “precisely at the moment that colonized peoples
 demand and appropriate to themselves the status of men [...] French
 intellectuals announce the ‘death of man.’”⁴⁰

“I scan for upside-down ships on the horizon, but I am not
 in luck”⁴¹

34 Stewart, “A Note on the Impossible Novel.”

35 Davidson, “Practicing Uncertainty.”

36 Wood-Reichert, “Seeing Double.”

37 Auburn, “Yours/Mine/Ours.”

38 Walsh, “Did a bot write this?”

39 Hannah Van Hove, “A Lot of Gestures to Unlearn’: Christine Brooke-
 Rose’s Auto-...practices,” chapter 6.

40 Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of
 French Culture* (MIT Press, 1995), 163.

41 Davidson, “Practicing Uncertainty.”

Perhaps the same critique can be extended to the popularity of all forms of posthumanism —

“the plot a soft echo”⁴²

although, yes, of course,

“trust in the form”⁴³

after all the linguistic, affective, posthumanist turns in the humanities, we have come to realize that identity is never stable but always mediated by discourses, unconscious bodily, psychological, economic, and social processes.

“A hearty, verdant hysterical projection, it never ceases emerging from itself”⁴⁴

A subject is part of an immense network of different agents, from the bacteria in one’s guts defining one’s mood, to the cobalt used to keep electronic writing devices running.

“This can be a form of love”⁴⁵

After all, the death of the (hu)man does not mean the death of subjectivity.

“learns and unlearns, learns in order to unlearn, unlearns in order to learn”⁴⁶

Autotheoretical texts thus celebrate and complicate

“The teasing always started during the actual dinner”⁴⁷

a subject’s drive to make sense of one’s own existence,

“take a step backward to try and get away from the sick but continue to projectile-vomit in a steady stream”⁴⁸

being, unlike minerals, animals, geological processes, or AI, both aware of the possibilities to resist and to change,

“contradiction and failure are welcome”⁴⁹

and of the certainty of finitude and death.

42 Ibid.

43 Auburn, “Yours/Mine/Ours.”

44 Saterstrom, “Writing the Impossible.”

45 Ibid.

46 Van Hove, “A Lot of Gestures to Unlearn.”

47 Williams, “The Queer Genre of Autocollage.”

48 Davidson, “Practicing Uncertainty.”

49 Foley, “Lo-Fi Critique.”

“That pressure has to go somewhere, be absorbed somehow”⁵⁰

The subject is a speaking being that has to wander in this strange unclaimed territory between a biological organism and the discursive structures that provide it with its identity,

“one promiscuous cluster”⁵¹

haunted by a desire that brings it beyond both language and biology.

“gestures outside of itself toward things that are not under its control and cannot be solved through its singular means”⁵²

It is this subjectivity that autotheory takes seriously, even if it is fully aware that this subject is never self-contained,

“Forgive me if I’m pushing that metaphor too far”⁵³

but the result of a complex and ongoing relation with others, including the other-than-human.

“Can a flower even experience love?”⁵⁴

So, autotheory should precisely be the opposite of a narcissistic display of the ego.

“the assumed one-to-one relationship between interiority and surface”⁵⁵

It shatters the illusion of a self-contained, unmediated identity:

“the intimacy shared in writing”⁵⁶

the autotheoretical self.

“the adjective modifying the noun”⁵⁷

Doing autotheory properly means precisely entering this, as Barthes defines it, “composite, oblique space” of the text, this “multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of

50 Foley, “Lo-Fi Critique.”

51 Williams, “The Queer Genre of Autocollage.”

52 Foley, “Lo-Fi Critique.”

53 Daffron and McLaughlin, “The Dialectics of Friendship.”

54 poupeh missaghi, “نرگس/Narges/Narcissus,” chapter 8.

55 Wood-Reichert, “Seeing Double.”

56 Van Hove, “A Lot of Gestures to Unlearn.”

57 Gallop, “Anecdotal Theory and Autotheory.”

them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.”⁵⁸

“It makes the sound of ice quietly breaking when you hold it to your face and turn it”⁵⁹

This performative “I” is no longer a monolithic authorial figure, confidently holding all the reins,

“(This image here, though shot in France, is not it.)”⁶⁰

but rather someone who realizes one is no longer in control, even when it comes to one’s own identity.

“a problem of too much self and not enough other”⁶¹

Autotheory’s driving force is citationality, the performing of gestures, phrases, and storylines that have to be borrowed from these “innumerable centres of culture.”

“Assembling a self from literary fragments was an aesthetic practice”⁶²

It is after all autotheory, not author-theory, and this “auto” marks the “I” of the text as a “oneself,” a reflexive pronoun, relational and always relative to a changing context.

“A horizon that can bend seems full of infinite possibilities”⁶³

This “oneself” of autotheory here acts as the bridge between a specific human being, a speaking body, and the messy domain of conflicting discourses that establish one’s subjectivity

“The grocer and butcher are still there, and the shutters are still blue”⁶⁴

culturally, medically, religiously ... all forms of speaking and reasoning that force this “self” to position and perform itself, but also—and here emerges the critical function of the genre—to question the contradictions, the chasms between these discourses themselves and in relation to personal life events.

58 Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 146.

59 King, “Monologue on the Crip Education of a Bodymind.”

60 Van Hove, “A Lot of Gestures to Unlearn.”

61 Gallop, “Anecdotal Theory and Autotheory.”

62 Paige Sweet, “An Apprenticeship in Not-Knowing,” chapter 7.

63 Davidson, “Practicing Uncertainty.”

64 Van Hove, “A Lot of Gestures to Unlearn.”

“the oscillation between individual and collective memory”⁶⁵

“hesitating, pausing, thinking over”⁶⁶

“slid into the story through the crease where the book cracks on its spine”⁶⁷

It is about discerning where and when an “I” is forced to speak.

“To go under a sign, you think, is not all that distinct from going under the knife, as the phrase has it”⁶⁸

This force can sometimes make itself felt very explicitly, but sometimes also very subtly,

“The writing before you, too, must remain only a modest note”⁶⁹

by the automatic interiorization of discursive and narrative patterns, the contagious nature of clichés, the apparent self-evidence of a specific outlook.

“I am finding it hard to work from quotations”⁷⁰

Or when the opposite happens, and this “I” is forced to shut up,

“It is likely occurring elsewhere”⁷¹

choking upon what remains unspoken, perhaps even unspeakable in the specific (sub)culture to which one belongs.

“What you’re left with is a contradiction between your body, extended in space and time, and a time that can’t accommodate it but that it must necessarily inhabit”⁷²

Autotheory precisely tries, fails, tries again, to evoke a counterforce, a counterdiscourse to resist this silencing, this choking, searching for other kinships, creating other ways of speaking.

“I, too, have desired a new writing practice”⁷³

65 Auburn, “Yours/Mine/Ours.”

66 missaghi, “نرگس/Narges/Narcissus.”

67 Saterstrom, “Writing the Impossible.”

68 King, “Monologue on the Crip Education of a Bodymind.”

69 Stewart, “A Note on the Impossible Novel.”

70 Davidson, “Practicing Uncertainty.”

71 Foley, “Lo-Fi Critique.”

72 King, “Monologue on the Crip Education of a Bodymind.”

73 Stewart, “A Note on the Impossible Novel.”

* * *

It is important to stress here that the relationality of autotheory, and the reflective pronoun "oneself" that underlies autotheoretical texts, also extends to the "oneself" of the reader,

"blur the borders around the self"⁷⁴

making them realize they too have skin in the game, belong to the same discursive field, the same open-ended text.

"What you love is not the thing itself but the impression it leaves on you"⁷⁵

Precisely because the author of an autotheoretical text so ostensibly mixes personal, intimate experiences with theoretical reflection,

"I'm not saying what I believe is correct or even a good idea"⁷⁶

it becomes all but impossible for the reader to remain neutral, to keep their distance.

"skin is fundamental to our existence"⁷⁷

For a good autotheoretical text shatters this illusion of disinvolverment.

"All the bodies in all directions"⁷⁸

In this sense, autotheoretical practice can be regarded as the wayward love child of existentialism and poststructuralism.

"It happens in the best of queer families"⁷⁹

Pretending that one's own reading self is not also implicated in the psychological, social, ecological setting of an autotheoretical text would be an act of Sartrean bad faith.

"lulled into a false sense of security"⁸⁰

Beneath the almost voyeuristic view on the intimate life stories of others lies a stubborn, ethical question that demands the reader's position.

74 Wood-Reichert, "Seeing Double."

75 missaghi, "نرگس/Narges/Narcissus."

76 Saterstrom, "Writing the Impossible."

77 Daffron and McLaughlin, "The Dialectics of Friendship."

78 Saterstrom, "Writing the Impossible."

79 Williams, "The Queer Genre of Autocollage."

80 Auburn, "Yours/Mine/Ours."

"I have another question, you said. I knew you would, he said"⁸¹

* * *

It is interesting to see how this "auto"-relationality is established, how this autotheoretical pact is actually sealed. Two features autotheory shares with more classic theoretical texts are, of course, a followed line of reasoning and a shared conceptual framework.

"in order to address complexities and contradictions, in order to theorize better"⁸²

The classic devices of critical theory, usually applied to cultural artifacts or historical periods, help here to disentangle some of the knots of everyday life.

"on reading that last sentence, the partner laughingly calls the researcher a liar"⁸³

But while reading an autotheoretical text, something else happens:

"threading beads, narrating, self-filming, swimming, and bronze casting"⁸⁴

the reader is not only engaged on an intellectual, cognitive level but also on an affective, corporeal one.

"It's easy to mistake one thing for another"⁸⁵

And here the author starts to play a different role, already acknowledged by Barthes himself

"Do all roads lead to Barthes?"⁸⁶

when he coined the term "biographèmes" in the introduction of *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (1971). This book marked the "the amicable return of the author"⁸⁷ in his work,

81 King, "Monologue on the Crip Education of a Bodymind."

82 Gallop, "Anecdotal Theory and Autotheory."

83 Van Hove, "A Lot of Gestures to Unlearn."

84 Auburn, "Yours/Mine/Ours."

85 Sweet, "An Apprenticeship in Not-Knowing."

86 Daffron and McLaughlin, "The Dialectics of Friendship."

87 Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller (University of California Press, 1989), 8.

"his own individual tale of facing death, losing friends, and recalling the evidence for his belief in premonitions"⁸⁸

no longer as a figure of authority,

"Wait a minute!"⁸⁹

not even as a "biographical hero"⁹⁰

"We still want to see men flexing muscle"⁹¹

but as an affective figure.

"I realize that none of these things can be resolved; transgression is necessary"⁹²

Barthes defines "biographèmes" as these glimpses of the personal life of an author, "a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections,"⁹³ that can detach themselves from a life story, a history, an ideological constellation.

"consumes, then assumes, every shape in its gluttonous pursuit to persist and be"⁹⁴

They are textual (auto)biographical fragments that disperse, swirl

"disrupt[ing] the binaries of before and after"⁹⁵

till they reach "some future body, destined to the same dispersion":⁹⁶

"I had love!"⁹⁷

the body of the reader.

"Yes, although I am sure you do not believe me, it is true"⁹⁸

88 Auburn, "Yours/Mine/Ours."

89 Williams, "The Queer Genre of Autocollage."

90 Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, 8.

91 Williams, "The Queer Genre of Autocollage."

92 Auburn, "Yours/Mine/Ours."

93 Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, 9.

94 Saterstrom, "Writing the Impossible."

95 Williams, "The Queer Genre of Autocollage."

96 Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, 9.

97 Sweet, "An Apprenticeship in Not-Knowing."

98 Stewart, "A Note on the Impossible Novel."

These “biographèmes” are examples of what we have called elsewhere minor memories:⁹⁹ the smallest sensorial, emotional, affective units one can recall,

“an oracular glimmer”¹⁰⁰

“I relish those moments when the quotidian rubs bellies with the sublime”¹⁰¹

so small they can easily detach themselves from an (auto) biographical plot,

“We pitch relevance through all the gestures: We want the reader to know why something is important”¹⁰²

a historical narrative, and touch this “future body.”

“I think about the hinging knee joints in my own body, which allow my thighs to rest on my calves when I kneel”¹⁰³

This volume of autotheoretical texts is filled with them.

“hands on the wheel, waiting for the light to change and hoping it wouldn’t. How you needed a shave”¹⁰⁴

These minor memories are not trivial, casual, superfluous elements in an autotheoretical essay.

“chewed it up, and digested it. Now it is something of me”¹⁰⁵

They possess strong affective agency on their own and generate to a great extent the charm (in the sense of attraction, but perhaps also of magical spell) of autotheory.

an “invitation to construct a plural self and the entanglement this presents”¹⁰⁶

In the act of reading, these minor memories operate as what anthropologist Kathleen Stewart called “rogue intensities,”¹⁰⁷

99 Maria Gil Ulldemolins and Kris Pint, “Wherever You Go, You Will Be a City: Minor Memories and Tactics of Empathy in the Work of Lisa Robertson,” *Writingplace* 2 (2018): 65–80.

100 Saterstrom, “Writing the Impossible.”

101 Daffron and McLaughlin, “The Dialectics of Friendship.”

102 Saterstrom, “Writing the Impossible.”

103 Wood-Reichert, “Seeing Double.”

104 King, “Monologue on the Crip Education of a Bodymind.”

105 Davidson, “Practicing Uncertainty.”

106 Auburn, “Yours/Mine/Ours.”

107 Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Duke University Press, 2007), 44.

“This experience is one you understand”¹⁰⁸

referring to “all the lived, yet unassimilated, impacts of things, all the fragments of experience left hanging,”

“the body as attached, specific, and material”¹⁰⁹

all that “makes a life [pulse] at the edges of things”¹¹⁰ —

“the night outdoors, indoors: a gate, a labyrinth, the dimmed lights”¹¹¹

they are unique and belong to a specific mode of existence, the “I” of the autotheoretical narrator, but in the act of writing, their affective, sensorial intensity in a way sets them free,

“oh, I was on the verge of crying with joy”¹¹²

allow them to travel from one body to another.

“eaten alive from the inside”¹¹³

* * *

The transmission of these memories, these intensities is never unmediated but always requires a careful consideration of possible modes of expression.

“My plan to remain invisible is not really working”¹¹⁴

Wanting to go beyond the limitations of an academic paper, autotheory explores the possibilities of the hybrid genre,

“relation, mediation, alliance, and assembly”¹¹⁵

mixing theoretical reflection not only with the personal memoir but also with other genres where the self tries to make sense of the world it inhabits — through correspondence, oral tradition, scrapbooks (and many other venues, as this collection proves).

108 King, “Monologue on the Crip Education of a Bodymind.”

109 Wood-Reichert, “Seeing Double.”

110 Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 44.

111 Williams, “The Queer Genre of Autocollage.”

112 missaghi, “نرگس/Narges/Narcissus.”

113 Saterstrom, “Writing the Impossible.”

114 Davidson, “Practicing Uncertainty.”

115 Foley, “Lo-Fi Critique.”

“The researcher peers through the gates and through the window”¹¹⁶

For experimenting with other modes of living also requires experimenting with other forms of expression, ways of establishing contact with a reader,

“Yet one can’t claim that I haven’t been intimate”¹¹⁷

and making a transmission but also a transformation possible. Begoña Méndez:

Aren’t bodies contact structures, exchange systems, susceptible wrappings, reactive material? Each body that responds to our call, each voice that speaks to us and touches us from within, originates an affective event. The outside moves us and gives us meaning. It cuts out our features. Then it disfigures us. Later it interrogates us and modifies us again.¹¹⁸

“Reading this provoked a queasy feeling”¹¹⁹

It is this “affective event” that an autotheoretical text can trigger in the body of the reader,

“My soul twitched”¹²⁰

putting it into motion, revealing, just like the setting sunlight reveals dust particles in our room,

“poetic, funny, articulate”¹²¹

the swirl of emotions, feelings, thoughts, minor memories that may date from childhood,

116 Van Hove, “A Lot of Gestures to Unlearn.”

117 Daffron and McLaughlin, “The Dialectics of Friendship.”

118 Begoña Méndez, *Autocienciaficción para el fin de la especie* (H&O Editores, 2022), 135. Our translation from the original Spanish: “¿Acaso no son los cuerpos estructuras de contacto, sistemas de intercambio, envoltorios susceptibles, material reactivo? Cada cuerpo que responde a nuestro llamado, cada voz que nos habla y que nos toca por dentro, origina un acontecimiento afectivo. El afuera nos conmueve y nos da significado. Nos recorta los rasgos. Después nos los desfigura. Más tarde nos interroga y vuelve a modificarnos.”

119 Sweet, “An Apprenticeship in Not-Knowing.”

120 Ibid.

121 Auburn, “Yours/Mine/Ours.”

“those known intimately”¹²²
 or just yesterday, and traverse the potentialities and intensi-
 ties they can offer.
 “those we have never met”¹²³

* * *

Barthes’s symbolic “death of the author” was precisely the price to be paid to make the birth of the reader possible.¹²⁴

“Thank God for the dimmed lights!”¹²⁵

Autotheory could be what Barthes was looking for in his later lecture courses at the Collège de France, as formulated in *The Neutral*: “an introduction to living, a guide to life (ethical project).”¹²⁶

“This was complicated, however”¹²⁷

Still to be written, it can only emerge in the “auto” that reads it

“I [...] encountered myself as an obstacle”¹²⁸

(while again never forgetting how polyphonous and diverse, mediated and layered this self is).

only “a visitor, strange but familiar”¹²⁹

To use another of Barthes’s famous oppositions: The autotheoretical text is not a “readerly” text

“see if it spontaneously generates the language of angels”¹³⁰
 but a “writerly” one.

122 Ibid.

123 Auburn, “Yours/Mine/Ours.”

124 Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 148.

125 Williams, “The Queer Genre of Autocollage.”

126 Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (Columbia University Press, 2005), 11.

127 Wood-Reichert, “Seeing Double.”

128 Sweet, “An Apprenticeship in Not-Knowing.”

129 Daffron and McLaughlin, “The Dialectics of Friendship.”

130 Walsh, “Did a bot write this?”

“Once the researcher and family arrive, the car is parked, and they take a walk into the village, further following the instructions”¹³¹

It is a text that has no fixed meaning to be decoded or interpreted.

“But what exactly the connection is remains, in their formulation, a bit unclear”¹³²

Instead, it needs the co-performance of a reader in order to be established.

“presumably as an admonishment for ignorance or bad manners, or a combination of both”¹³³

This allows the autotheoretical gaze to turn back upon itself, and in doing so, it rewrites the texts of the reader’s own life. A collection of autotheoretical texts like this one can thus be compared to a relay game,

“I must confess that this chapter concerns writing that is not my own”¹³⁴

with the “I” as the baton that passes through different hands,

“Now, this might be a good time to mention that I have, personally, been in auto accidents that have resulted in the writing off of no fewer than sixteen vehicles. [...] But never mind”¹³⁵

atmospheres, voices, events,

“an opportunity to gather more people”¹³⁶

only to be left in your hands:

“This is actually pretty damning (and it stung when I first read it)”¹³⁷

this “I” is all yours now.

“I want to roll in the mud with it.”¹³⁸

131 Van Hove, “A Lot of Gestures to Unlearn.”

132 Gallop, “Anecdotal Theory and Autotheory.”

133 Saterstrom, “Writing the Impossible.”

134 Davidson, “Practicing Uncertainty.”

135 Stewart, “A Note on the Impossible Novel.”

136 Foley, “Lo-Fi Critique.”

137 Gallop, “Anecdotal Theory and Autotheory.”

138 Auburn, “Yours/Mine/Ours.”

Bibliography

- Barthes, Roland. *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. Translated by Richard Miller. University of California Press, 1989.
- . “The Death of the Author.” In *Image Music Text*, translated by Stephen Heath. Fontana, 1977.
- . *The Neutral*. Translated by Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier. Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Gil Ulldemolins, Maria, and Kris Pint, “Wherever You Go, You Will Be a City: Minor Memories and Tactics of Empathy in the Work of Lisa Robertson.” *Writingplace 2* (2018): 65–80. DOI: 10.7480/writingplace.2.2640.
- Méndez, Begoña. *Autocienciaficción para el fin de la especie*. H&O Editores, 2022.
- Ross, Kristin. *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*. MIT Press, 1995.
- Stewart, Kathleen. *Ordinary Affects*. Duke University Press, 2007.

Contributor Biographies

Cat Auburn is an Aotearoa New Zealand artist and a tutor in the School of Design at Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh. Her art practice (sculpture, textile, film, event, and writing) focuses on how cultural heritage is constructed, reinforced, and strategically employed. Auburn's PhD research (AHRC Northern Bridge Consortium, Northumbria University) focused on the practice-based, autotheoretical exploration of the personal, political, and social stakes of engaging with national identity and collective memory. She is co-editor of a special issue of the journal *Arts* titled *Autotheory in Contemporary Visual Arts Practice* (2022/2023). In 2016, her exhibition, *The Horses Stayed Behind*, received a New Zealand Museum award. More information about Auburn can be found at <http://www.catauburn.com>.

Based in New York City, **Eric Daffron** is a professor of Literature at Ramapo College of New Jersey. Early in his career, he published widely on early British Gothic literature and other topics. His monograph, *Romantic Doubles: Sex and Sympathy in British Gothic Literature, 1790–1830*, appeared in 2002 from AMS Press. More recently, he has explored the theoretical implications of

topics as diverse as masturbation, sex clubs, pornography, COVID-19, and masks. With Becky R. McLaughlin, he edited *The Body in Theory: Essays after Lacan and Foucault* (McFarland 2021). He has also written travel memoirs about Morocco and creative-critical essays inspired by Roland Barthes. That work has been published or accepted for publication in *Moving across the Landscape in Search of an Idea* (Air and Nothingness Press 2024) and in *Synthesis: An Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies*, *European Journal of Life Writing*, *L'Esprit Literary Review*, *The AutoEthnographer*, *Impost: A Journal of Creative and Critical Work*, *Text: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, and *Panorama: The Journal of Travel, Place, and Nature*.

Laura Davidson is currently working on a PhD at Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts, UK. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, her research project poses the following questions: What is the nature of the “something else” that art writing uncovers, and how does it contribute to our understanding of art history and cultural discourse? The original idea for her PhD came while supporting students with their written assignments at London College of Communication, Camberwell College of Art, and Central Saint Martins. She is a member of Bladr, an artist-run space in Copenhagen, Denmark, which focuses on artists’ books.

Joshua Peter Foley is a PhD candidate at the University of Iowa, where he studies autotheory, pedagogy, postcriticism, and the relationship between radical politics and creative and critical writing. His other published work can be found in *Spectator* and forthcoming from *The Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*.

Jane Gallop is Distinguished Professor Emerita of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She is the author of over a hundred articles and ten books. Four of her books have been recognized as examples of autotheory: *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment* (Duke University Press 1997), *Anecdotal Theory* (Duke University Press 2002), *Living with His Camera* (Duke

University Press 2003), and *Sexuality, Disability and Aging: Queer Temporalities of the Phallus* (Duke University Press 2019).

Maria Gil Ulldemolins is Assistant Professor of Creative-Critical Research Methods in the Architecture and Art Faculty of Hasselt University, Belgium. Her work uses academic, performative writing in order to generate meaning through unexpected, and often anachronistic, encounters. She is particularly concerned with citational and referential practices in the overlap of interiority, interior architecture, and language. She is one of the co-founders of the research line and peer-reviewed journal *Passage*.

Andrew David King is a doctoral student in English, Critical Theory, and Science and Technology Studies at University of California, Berkeley, where they direct the Disabled Students Advocacy Project for the Graduate Assembly. Their writing has appeared in *Disability and Care: Relational Representations* (Routledge 2025), *The Postcolonial Bildungsroman: Narratives of Youth, Representational Politics, and Aesthetic Reinventions* (University of Alberta Press 2025), *The Routledge Companion to Working-Class Literature*, *The Routledge Handbook of Ecofeminism and Literature*, and other venues. With Mary Ladd and others, they edited *The Long COVID Reader: Writing and Poetry from 45 Long Haulers* (Long Hauler Publishing 2023), the first anthology dedicated to presenting fiction, nonfiction, and poetry from writers living with long COVID.

Becky McLaughlin is Professor of English at the University of South Alabama, where she teaches critical theory, early American literature, film, and gender studies. She has published essays on a wide range of topics — amputee wannabes, epistemological trauma, feminine *jouissance*, rock music, sexual fantasy, and the voice, to name a few — across a wide range of periods and genres. She has also published autotheory based on her childhood in the Belgian Congo, her cousin's suicide in a Memphis jail cell, the death of an aerobatic pilot in the Arkansas Delta, her first

marriage and its annulment, and the panic attack as hysterical symptom. Although a smaller oeuvre, her fiction and poetry have appeared in journals such as *Intelligent Erotica*, *Transverse*, *Westview*, and *Zizzle Literary*. Two of her longer publications include *The Body in Theory: Essays after Lacan and Foucault* (McFarland 2021), co-edited with Eric Daffron, and *Hysteria, Perversion, and Paranoia in The Canterbury Tales* (Medieval Institute Publications 2020). She is currently completing an early American textbook entitled *American Fanatics, Heretics, and Rebels: Hot Protestants and Religious Strife in Early American Literature, 1620–1865*.

poupeh missaghi is a writer, editor, translator (between English and Persian), and educator. Her books include *Sound Museum*, published in 2024, and *trans(re)lating house one*, published in 2020, both with Coffee House Press. Her translations include *Boys of Love* by Ghazi Rabihavi (University of Wisconsin Press 2024), *In the Streets of Tehran* by Nila (Ithaka Press 2023), and *I'll be Strong for You* by Nasim Marashi (Astra House 2021). She is currently an assistant professor of English and Literary Arts at the University of Denver and a faculty mentor at the Low-Residency MFA in Creative Writing at the Pacific Northwest College of Art, Oregon.

Kris Pint is Associate Professor of Cultural Theory at the Faculty of Architecture and Arts at Hasselt University. His research focuses on how creative (non-)fiction can be used in artistic research and how literature, interior architecture, and visual arts help propose alternative forms of living, dwelling, and knowing. In addition to a series of articles published on these topics, and several books in Dutch, he is also the author of *The Perverse Art of Reading: On the Phantasmatic Semiology in Roland Barthes' Cours au Collège de France* (Brill Academic Publishers 2010).

Selah Saterstrom is the author of the novels *Slab*, *The Meat and Spirit Plan*, and *The Pink Institution*, all published by Coffee House Press. Her award-winning collection, *Ideal Suggestions*:

Essays in Divinatory Poetics, was published by Essay Press in 2018, and her most recent book, the longform essay *Rancher*, was published by Burrow Press in 2021. She teaches and lectures across the United States and abroad and is on the faculty at the University of Denver. She is the cofounder of Four Queens, an online platform celebrating Divinatory Poetics, where she teaches creative writing and divinatory arts.

Jeremy Stewart is a Scholar-in-Residence at Regent College, Vancouver, Canada. His current research relates to the phenomenon of literary pilgrimage, love between readers and authors, and the Russian-American novelist Vladimir Nabokov. His monograph *I, Daniel: An Illegitimate Reading of Jacques Derrida's "Envois"* was published in 2025 by Peter Lang Verlag as part of the New Comparative Criticism series. Stewart is also a musician and the author of three trade poetry collections.

Paige Sweet holds a PhD in Comparative Literature and teaches at the Bard Prison Initiative, the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research, and several psychoanalytic institutes. At the Manhattan Institute for Psychoanalysis, she is Chair of the Sexuality and Gender Initiative. Her writing has appeared in *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, *Parallax*, *The New Inquiry*, and other places. In 2023, she was awarded the Symonds Prize for her essay, "Mask Up." She is currently at work on a book of essays about states of not knowing. She's a Licensed Psychoanalyst in private practice in New York City.

Hannah Van Hove is a Senior Postdoctoral Research Fellow of the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. She works on various aspects of twentieth-century and contemporary literature in Britain and the United States and has a particular interest in experimental fiction, women's writing, health humanities, and creative-critical methodologies. Her first monograph, *Experiments in Subjectivity in Post-War British Women's Fiction: Unsettling Identity*, is forthcoming from Edinburgh University Press. Together with Andrew Rad-

ford, she is the editor of *British Experimental Women's Fiction, 1945–1975: Slipping Through the Labels* (Palgrave Macmillan 2021). Her current research project explores interrelationships between avant-garde women's writing and conceptual art during the long 1970s in the United States. She is chair of the Anna Kavan Society, a member of the editorial board of the *Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings*, and a member of the artistic research groups Deep Histories Fragile Memories and Critical Poetics. Her creative-critical writing has appeared in such venues as *MAP Magazine*, *Forum+*, and *Women: A Cultural Review*.

Joanna Walsh is a multidisciplinary writer working with text across print, digital, visual art, performance, and social practice. She is the author of eleven books (several co-written with AI, which she coded), and her publishers include Semiotext(e), Bloomsbury, and Verso. She was the 2020 Markievicz awardee for literature for the generative text work miss-communication.ie. She has also been awarded the 2018 Anthony Burgess Centenary Fellowship at the University of Manchester, the 2017 UK Arts Foundation fellowship for literature, and several bursaries and grants from the Irish and UK Arts Councils. She is currently a MSCA Postdoctoral Fellow at Maynooth University. She is an editor and arts activist, founding and running #read-women (2014–2018), which has been described by *The New York Times* as “a rallying cry for equal treatment for women writers.” She founded and currently runs @noentry_arts, challenging age barriers on arts awards and opportunities. Her website is <https://www.joannawalsh.ie/>.

Emilio Williams is a bilingual (Spanish/English) writer and educator who holds an MFA in Writing from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He is currently a candidate for a PhD by Practice at the University of London Paris Institute. He is the author of the open-source textbook *Decentering Theater Histories, Part 1: Ancestral Origins of Theater to Everyman (c. 1530)* published in PressBooks by DePaul University Library. His experimental essays have appeared most recently in *Slag*

Glass City, *The Journal of Black Mountain College Studies*, *Brevity Magazine*, *Writing Disorder*, *Hinterland Magazine*, *Imagined Theatres*, and the anthology *Beyond Queer Words 2021*. His critically acclaimed plays have been produced in Argentina, Estonia, France, Ireland, Mexico, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States, including the cities of New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Antonio, and Washington, DC. An independent scholar, Williams currently holds adjunct appointments at Dominican University and DePaul University. For more information you can visit <https://www.emiliowilliams.com>.

Alexandra Wood is a PhD candidate at the University of California, Riverside. Her research engages the problem of credibility faced by survivors of trauma and sexual violence and how survivors' self-representations challenge established norms. By bringing together trauma studies with autotheory, she develops the term autofabulation to describe survivors' strategic use of fiction, fantasy, and invention to open new possibilities for healing. Her focus moves fluidly between genres and forms, from autotheory, autofiction, and poetry to televisual performance and photography. Prior to her time in graduate school, she worked for four years as a middle and high school English teacher, which catalyzed her investment in trauma-informed pedagogical practice. She is currently engaged in an autotheoretical writing project that documents and reflects on her daily experience in bringing trauma sensitivity to the university classroom. While her reading, writing, and teaching selves all play important roles in her life, her favorite self is the one who bakes new recipes every weekend to share with her circle of friends and (when no one is looking) her dog, Spud.

