

Twenty-Seven Ways of Looking at Crip Autotheory

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1. Autotheory is “work that engages in thinking about the self, the body, and the particularities and peculiarities of one’s lived experiences, as processed through or juxtaposed against theory—or as the basis for theoretical thinking.”¹ This emerging genre “takes one’s embodied experiences as a primary text or raw material through which to theorize, process, and reiterate theory to feminist effects.”² Autotheoretical writing presents “the lives [it] chronicle[s] as deeply enmeshed in other lives and in history, in power relations that operate on multiple levels simultaneously.”³

2. There is no theory of autotheory that does not start with the ill and disabled bodymind. There is no theory of autotheory that is not already crip.

3. Is the opposite of life writing death writing? The theoretical term *necropolitics* crashed into the mainstream in the past two years, spreading its wide wings across a sky streaked with the colors of white-walled, overflowing ICUs and the deep crimson of Black blood staining the streets.⁴

Like many, I struggled with how to write during this time, how to make any sense of the world collapsing around us, what use my words could be to anyone, even myself.

4. I asked myself, is this autotheory? Is the real meaning of autotheory the attempt of the self to find meaning? And if I who am writing it is sick, disabled, crip, does that make this crip autotheory?

5. Like my invalid forbear Florence Nightingale, I took up my lamp and went in search of critical or craft writing about disability autotheory. To my great surprise, I found none.

6. I stopped to rest and strap on my wrist brace. Then I set off again, lamp held high, in search of the meaning of autotheory. I needed, I still need, to know if what I am doing is what this is.

Or do I?

7. My autonomic nervous system is slowly failing, my body forgetting the unconscious essential work of heartbeat and blood flow, digestion and sweat. I could write a hundred, a thousand metaphors out of this ragged collapse. None will help me as much as two liters of normal saline run intravenously over an hour. Theory has its limits. Words fail me.

8. *Autoimmune*: Allergic to self, the immune system attacks the body, mistaking it for an enemy.

Autonomic: Involuntary or unconscious, what the body does without us telling it to.

Autotheory: There is no body without mind or mind without body.⁵

Crip autotheory: Bodymind, mindbody, when have we ever drawn those lines?

9. It's disappointing, in 2022, to read thoughtful, informed, deep dives into autotheory that cannot conceive of, that do not bother to include, disability as a relevant category of analysis, one that must be theorized, one with its own bodies of knowledge, its communities, its politics, its *theories*.⁶

10. It's exhausting, in 2022, to read published, influential deep dives into autotheory that use disabled people's narratives and lives as their starting point, their *raison d'être*, their prime examples—Johanna Hedva's "Sick Woman Theory" (2020), for example—and still cannot seem to conceive of disability as a category of analysis in its own right.⁷

11. I think I have a name for this type of feminist theorizing, that which proceeds as if there had not been a quarter century of bold and brilliant crip interventions into feminist intellectual and political work.⁸ I think we should call it Well Woman Theory.

12. I could not find a single published article on the topic of disability and autotheory, not one, only the unpublished but brilliant work of Iseult Gillespie (2022), a graduate student in my own department.⁹

13. It's not as simple as saying we are left out. We are not even marginalized. We are there at the very center, the heart of this work, but only as objects, never as subjects with the right to theorize our own experience, to be the authors of our own autotheory.

I think that is rather ironic.

14. But enough of these cantankerous musings. As I said, they're exhausting and I'm always already exhausted.

Maybe that's why autotheory appeals. Many days I can't even get out of bed. I have no tales to tell of where I go, what I do. The story of my life is the story of my thoughts.

15. Wait, stop, that's not what autotheory is. Autotheory is "a practice of the self that works to undo it: to write an ethics of self-unsaying in the end times generated by the Anthropocene."¹⁰ Autotheory "offers a mode of resituating the subject within and against legitimated modes of knowledge production in solidarity with coalitional politics."¹¹

16. Q: When is an autobiography not a theory?

A: When it is of no use.

17. Q: When is a theory not an autobiography?

A: When it has no heart.

18. Autotheory sometimes contains or intersects with, yet is also more than, autobiography, memoir, *testimonio*, diary, confessional, blog—all the forms we sometimes gather together under the genre of “life writing.”¹² But how is it different or distinct from those broad and long-storied categories?

19. Many would cite two foundational recent texts, Maggie Nelson’s 2015 *Argonauts* and Paul Preciado’s 2013 *Testo Junkie*, as the ur-moments of contemporary autotheory. Nelson popularized the term, reflecting that she was “always looking for terms that are not ‘memoir’ to describe autobiographical writing that exceeds the bounds of the ‘personal.’”¹³

But does autotheory weave together theory and personal experience, or does it make theory out of personal experience, thus redefining what we mean by theory . . . or experience . . . or person?

20. The importance of this question, I think, is not merely of genre or form, or even the effects of genre and form. It is about purpose and history. It is common in the (mostly white) writing about (mostly white) autotheory to at least acknowledge its deep roots in the writings of feminists of color, such as Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Cherrie Moraga. But such mentions are usually brief, almost perfunctory, before the analytical and appreciative eye turns back to Nelson, Preciado, and other white authors.¹⁴

21. Exceptions occur, of course, and are important: Lauren Fournier’s discussion of a number of Black and Indigenous artists in her 2021 book *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, Kyle Frisina’s 2020 analysis of Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*, So Mayer’s brilliant 2018 exploration of racialized gaps and co-optations in Nelson’s *Argonauts*. The special issue of *ASAP/Journal* on autotheory that appeared just as I was finishing this chapter notably centers “historically marginalized perspectives on autotheory, dialoguing across Black, Indigenous (Plains Cree, Métis), Asian American, Chicana, and Mestizx epistemologies.”¹⁵

But in many ways, how autotheory has been theorized as a form or genre continues to center whiteness and a particularly white genealogy and definition of what theory is and does.

A different genealogy for autotheory, especially crip autotheory, needs to do some of the similar excavation and braiding work that Michael Hames-García (2011) does in his crucial revisionary history of queer theory, creating a timeline that integrates the crucial work of queer women of color like Lorde, Anzaldúa, and the members of the Combahee River Collective with that of queer theory’s canonized white scholars like Judith Butler and Michel Foucault.¹⁶

22. This work is not only genealogical but also crucially requires a reconceptualization of the auto/theory relationship: when we look at the feminist- and queer-of-color roots of autotheory, we see that those authors are not intertwining theory with experience so much as alchemizing experience into new theories, those necessary to understand and represent their own experiences.

“That self-connection shared,” wrote Lorde in 1978, “is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling. And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible, and does not have to be called *marriage*, nor *god*, nor *an afterlife*.”¹⁷

What is needed is not merely more sustained citation of and critical attention to works such as Lorde’s, but an integration and transformation of how the genre and form of autotheory are defined, deployed, and potentiated in service of multiple liberations.

23. The recent *ASAP/Journal* special issue laudably sets out to do such crucial work with regard to race and indigeneity. Of course, this makes it even more frustrating to note how the issue continues autotheory scholarship’s jarring, willed ignoring of disability as a category of analysis—even when the majority of authors and artists under discussion explicitly identify as mad or ill or crip or have been powerfully claimed as crip ancestors.¹⁸ Indeed, autotheory’s “politics of citation unveil its relations.”¹⁹

24. Lazard’s “In Sickness and Study,” Hedva’s “Sick Woman Theory,” Lo Bil’s presentation “Sick Theories,” Gloria Anzaldúa’s unpublished writings on health, Ann Cvetkovich’s *Depression: A Public Feeling* . . .²⁰

There is no theory of autotheory that is not already crip.

25. Who is creating crip autotheory today? Surely too many to name. Some, like Lazard and Hedva, have already been addressed in the field but without real recognition or engagement of their crip politics and contexts.

Others I could name include mixed-genre writers Eli Clare, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Petra Kuppers, Molly McCully Brown, and Aurora Levins Morales; poets like Travis Chi Wing Lau, Jim Ferris, Kenny Fries, Cyrée Jarelle Johnson, and Kay Ulanday Barrett; essayists and memoirists including Esmé Weijun Wang, Keah Brown, Simi Linton, Corbett O’Toole, Anne Finger, Sonya Huber, and Sejal Shah; graphic novelists like Cece Bell, Ellen Forney, and Coyote Shook; performers like the Sins Invalid Collective, Terry Galloway, Lynn Manning, and Carrie Sandahl; visual artists including Riva Lehrer, Katherine Sherwood, and Sunaura Taylor; and films such as *When Billy Broke His Head*, *Crip Camp*, and *Invitation to Dance*.²¹

Alice Wong’s 2020 edited collection *Disability Visibility* offers a marvelous sampling of many of these authors’ works. Indeed, I suggest that the entire collection functions autotheoretically.

26. Back to oversharing: three years ago, I began receiving IV infusions to calm my nervous system when it goes especially awry.

I hate it: the dizzying car ride, the hospital’s revolving door, the garish colors of the gift shop, the struggle to find a vein that will accept the needle. As medical experiences go, the infusion center is actually not bad. It’s accessible,

comfortable, covered by my insurance, and respectful of my body. What I hate is not so much the infusions themselves but the fact that I have to get them, that this has become the routine of my days.

So I started to take selfies in the infusion chair, selfies I cropped and filtered and posted on social media, annotated with mild puns: Infusion Noir. Chanukahfusion. Diana Princefusion of Themiscyra. I needed to have something, anything, to take from the experience that was not purely biological, not purely about me being broken and needing to be fixed. I am still doing it. I just posted an infusion selfie last week.

Is this autottheory? Or simply “selfie theory”?²² Or something else entirely?

27. Can a survival practice also be a theory? Can a theory ever be a survival practice? Is it ever anything else?

NOTES

- 1 Arianne Zwartjes. “Under the Skin: An Exploration of Autotheory,” *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019). <https://www.assayjournal.com/arianne-zwartjes8203-under-the-skin-an-exploration-of-autottheory-61.html>.
- 2 Lauren Fournier. 2018., “Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 33, no. 3: 646, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2018.1499495>.
- 3 Stacey Young. *Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics, and the Feminist Movement*. (New York: Routledge, 1997): 69.
- 4 Necropolitics, a term mostly deployed in academic realms, was coined by social theorist Achille Mbembe to describe how social power in modernity operates through the power of devalued life. Necropolitics describes “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (Mbembe, 11). Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Movement for Black Lives prompted discussion of necropolitics in the wider cultural realm, as in for example Namrata Verghese’s article “What is Necropolitics” published in *Teen Vogue* magazine on March 10, 2021. <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-is-necropolitics>.
- 5 “There is an important emphasis on body in autotheory, on bringing physicality and embodied experience into the writing, in dialogue with the theoretical or other academic material . . . And there is a certain rebelliousness to working in the realm of autotheory: an assertive disregard of genre, category, boundary; a willingness to take on established fields of theoretical work and to say, we are body as much as we are brain” (Zwartjes, “Under The Skin: An Exploration of Autotheory”).
- 6 See for example the 2020 special issue of *Arizona Quarterly* on “Autotheory Theory,” including the introduction by Robyn Wiegman (“Introduction: Autotheory Theory”); the 2021 special issue of *ASAP/Journal on Autotheory* including the introduction by Alex Brostoff and Lauren Fournier, (“Introduction: Autotheory ASAP! Academia, Decoloniality, and ‘I’”); Zwartjes, “Under the Skin: An Exploration of Autotheory.”
- 7 Fournier. “Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory.” In Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021.
- 8 For example, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” *NWSA Journal* 14, no. 3 (2002); Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013); Schalk, Sami and Jina B. Kim, “Integrating Race, Transforming Feminist Disability Studies” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 46, no. 1 (2020): 31–55.

- 9 Iseult Gillespie, "A Dialogue in Pain: Autotheoretical Affinity and Disabled Coalition in *Bluets* and *A Body Undone*." Unpublished article, 2022.
- 10 Robyn Wiegman, "Introduction: Autotheory Theory," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 76, no. 1 (2020): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.2020.0009>.
- 11 Brostoff and Fournier, 493.
- 12 See G. Thomas Couser, *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021); Susannah B. Mintz, *Unruly Bodies: Life Writing by Women with Disabilities* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
- 13 Nelson quoted in Wiegman, "Introduction: Autotheory Theory," 2.
- 14 See for example the 2020 special issue of *Arizona Quarterly* on "Autotheory Theory." See also Shannon Brennan's critique of the white autotheory archive in her "Troublesome Knowledge: Autotheory in the Queer Classroom" (*ASAP/Journal* 6, no. 3 (2021): 727 n.8) and Daniel Peña's 2016 *Ploughshares* blog post, "The Argonauts Is A Direct Descendant Of Anzaldúa's Borderlands/La Frontera And No One Is Talking About It," <https://blog.pshares.org/the-argonauts-is-a-direct-descendant-of-anzalduas-borderlandsla-frontera-and-no-one-is-talking-about-it/>.
- 15 Brostoff and Fournier, 492.
- 16 Michael Hames-García, "Queer Theory Revisited." In *Gay Latino Studies*, ed. Michael Hames-García and Ernesto Javier Martínez (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011): 19–45. Brennan also references Hames-García's genealogical work (728 n.9).
- 17 Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984): 57.
- 18 For example, the reclaiming of Gloria Anzaldúa as crip ancestor, most notably by Aurora Levins Morales (who is herself often referenced in autotheory studies without mention of her disability identity and politics). Reflecting on the unavailability of disability community to Anzaldúa in her lifetime, Levins Morales writes: "Gloria, if you were here now, among us, with your endlessly bleeding womb and glucose making tidal waves in your blood, you would not be silent about this, because you would not be alone. I think if we called on you to bring the story of your body into this circle, you would come" (*Kindling: Writings on the Body*, 9).
- 19 Brostoff and Fournier, 490.
- 20 All works are referenced in the September 2021 special issue of *ASAP/Journal* on "Autotheory" and/or in Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*.
- 21 Of course this is not an exhaustive list; there are dozens more authors and works that could be cited here. Indeed, the field of crip autotheory is deep and wide enough to support book-length exploration, which makes it all the more striking that I could not find a single published article on the topic. Also many of the authors/artists mentioned here work in more than one genre—Riva Lehrer recently published an acclaimed memoir, for example—but in order to provide some contextual groupings for readers new to the area, I placed each name here in proximity to the genre for which they are best known.
- 22 See Fournier, "Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory," 651–658.

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