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## Under the Skin: An Exploration of Autotheory

*“Theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin.” — Sara Ahmed*

I remember once, in graduate school, being floored when I heard one of my professors say, “I wanted to learn about X, so I proposed a class this semester focusing on it.” The idea that you didn’t already have to possess absolute Authority on a topic—that you could explore it through your preparations and then explore it even more deeply in reading and conversation *together with* your students—was both astonishing and exciting. Such a horizontal approach to knowledge and scholarly authority is mirrored in the contemporary field of autotheory, which seeks to explore, test, and converse with theory through investigations of the lived-body experience. This year I offered two classes on autotheory, as much to investigate the topic myself as to posit any kind of expertise. My students and I read texts by Christina Sharpe and Dionne Brand, Paul Preciado and Maggie Nelson, Bhanu Kapil and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Kathy Acker, Chris Kraus, and Ann Cvetkovich; we tried to gather our thoughts about our own bodies of work and the themes and theory that might unite them, and wrote short pieces experimenting with the mixture of citation and narrative that autotheory invites. Over and over, we asked: *what is autotheory? What does it do? What [new] things does it offer us?*

This essay seeks to share some of the answers we found to those questions, looking at definitions of autotheory as well as its historical roots; looking closely at aspects of a few autotheoretical texts including Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake* and Bhanu Kapil’s *Ban en Banlieu*; and exploring elements of theory

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and embodiment, innovation and assessment, multiplicity and rupture in the contemporary field of autotheory as part of the broader genre of creative nonfiction.

## Definitions

*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. It strips the pretension of neutrality, of objectivity, away from the theorizing voice. Often discursive, it offers us a thought-provoking, multivalent kind of hybridity, one unafraid to mix theory with creativity and lyricism, and with the graphic details of one's very specific physical experience. Lauren Fournier, whose dissertation investigates autotheory, defines it as “contemporary works of literature, art, and art-writing that integrate autobiography and other explicitly subjective and embodied modes with discourses of philosophy and theory in ways that transgress genre conventions and disciplinary boundaries” (“Autotheory”). The term was used, if not coined, by Stacey Young in a chapter of her 1997 *Changing the Wor(L)D: Discourse, Politics, and Feminist Movement*, where she investigates writing that attempts “to counter discourses that homogenize ‘women,’ and that reify the concerns and strategies of relatively privileged women, with other discourses that center on the experiences and perspectives of women traditionally marginalized on the grounds of race, class, ethnic or religious background, sexuality, physical ability, and so forth” (61). Young labels the genre of those counter-discourses *autotheoretical*, and notes that such texts—a hybrid of theory and autobiography—are documentation of a kind of “discursive political activism” which is critically intersectional and feminist.

While interest in the contemporary field of autotheory has been growing over the past ten years, attention toward the term increased significantly with the 2015 publication of Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, which bore the descriptor *autotheory* on its book jacket. Yet there is little published commentary or explanation of what autotheory actually is, particularly outside of scholarly work, leaving those who are

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interested in it to delve deep or read between the lines, piecing together bits from recent articles and interviews with Maggie Nelson, Wayne Koestenbaum, and others. A number of recent works fall into the realm of autotheory: Claudia Rankine, Wayne Koestenbaum, Sara Ahmed, Fred Moten, Hilton Als, Brian Blanchfield, Saidiya Hartman, Alison Bechdel, Eve Sedgwick, Cristina Crosby, and Ann Boyer belong on the growing list of authors, along with those named above in this essay's introduction.

Among the things autotheory offers us that are “new”—or are of particular resonance at this moment in time—are its quick movement back and forth between different modalities of thinking and examining the world; the way it creates a sense of parallel, rather than of hierarchy, between different ways of knowing, thinking, and analyzing; and lastly, its innovative formal and structural contributions to the creative writing field as it navigates these multiple modalities.

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When I first began exploring the subject of autotheory, I wondered how this combination of theory and autobiography differed from the feminist mantra *the personal is political*—or if in fact it did. Through my research and readings, and via Young and others' thinking, I have come to understand autotheory as highly intersectional, and rooted in a long history of work, especially work by Black feminists and other women of color. Honoring this history requires us to look at least as far back as the writing and performance art of Gloria Anzaldúa, Adrian Piper, Audre Lorde, Ana Mendieta, Cherríe Moraga, bell hooks, and on and on, as well as the work of white queer feminists such as Mab Segrest and Minnie Bruce Pratt. Many of these writers and artists were doing overtly autotheoretical work, while others laid a foundation for more explicitly autotheoretical work to come.

Autotheory is also connected to multiple other fields of academic study: in a recent call for papers, Margeaux Feldman and Philip Sayers point to the importance of “understand[ing] autotheory in a social context” and as situated in or connected to other academic fields, including French theory, Black Studies, New Narrative—and, I would add, Postcolonial Studies and Queer Theory.

As such, it is critical to avoid ahistoricism in our approach to the contemporary field of autotheory, and it is of particular importance to acknowledge the immense contributions of Black women and other women of color to this genre, in a moment where several of the autotheoretical texts receiving a great deal of popular attention—such as *The Argonauts* and *I Love Dick*—are by white authors.

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Naming, itself, is often a highly fraught activity of claiming, defining, narrowing, and at times excluding. Speaking of the trendiness of the term *autofiction* in a recent *Paris Review* conversation with Chris Kraus, Olivia Laing asks, “Why, anyway, do people feel such a need to pin things down in terms of genre?” While I have often shared Laing’s frustration with our apparent need to cram writing into labeled, boxed-in genres, and I understand her reticence about the drive to *name*, to “pin down,” it is also a part of our reality that to give something a name is to give it visibility; to be able to think of something as *in a category* allows us to think about and probe the edges of that category, its functions and its politics, what new things it might offer us (while at the same time, of course, being a double-edged sword: to make visible by grouping something means those boundaries can also then be policed or become restrictive). It provides a context and a paradigm for work to exist within, both in ways that may help legitimize the work where needed, but also that allow us to examine it alongside other conceptually-similar work.

While the most literal definition of autotheory is work which explicitly combines autobiographical material with theory, there are of course many gradations and variances in how this actually manifests within different projects. Because we were not particularly interested in policing autotheory’s borders, my students and I found it useful to instead use both narrow and broader working-definitions as we examined various projects through the lens of *autotheory*. We came to speak of “little-umbrella” autotheory—that most-literal definition which explicitly weaves together physically-embodied autobiographical material with theory, as in Paul B. Preciado’s *Testo Junkie*, or Sharpe’s *In the Wake*—and “big-umbrella” autotheory, which

includes, in the words of Sally Keith, “personal narratives that are woven together with philosophy, psychology, criticism,” and other fields of knowledge, thus loosening the definition and broadening beyond just theory. There were projects, we felt, that used “softer strokes” in bringing theory or other disciplines into their work, and then there was, as with any territory, a gradual fade into shades of grey around the edges of what might be called autotheoretical or autotheory-related work.

Lastly, it is worth noting that autotheory as a practice is certainly not limited to the medium of writing; in Fournier’s words, “there is something especially performative and art-world-related about autotheory as it has taken shape in recent years, and it is here where my research into autotheory as a trans-medial mode of feminist practice enters the picture” (“Artist’s Video”). As one example, Fournier curated “Autotheory,” a screening program with work by numerous filmmakers for *Vtape* in May 2018.

## Theory

A friend recently told me about a class she taught early in her career, on the poetry of witness: the students were feeling overwhelmed by the amount of trauma in the readings, they weren’t connecting, and another colleague said, “You’ve *got* to give them some theory so they have some tools to contextualize it, to understand it.” As human beings, we are deeply hardwired for story—it’s how we make meaning—and in this instance we could think of *theory* as another kind of a story: a narrative that makes sense of things. We might then define theory, 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.

Historically this articulation has been couched in bodiless and emotionless “objective” voice, and one of the powers of autotheory is to move beyond that pretense of objectivity which “theorizes without pragmatic connection to materiality or to empirical knowledge” (Blau DuPlessis 22). The opposite of such objectivity, Blau DuPlessis notes, is “not *subjective* but *implicated* . . . and intersubjective.” Autotheory’s move

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to bring autobiographical material together with the theoretical realm fits into the larger context of the affective turn in cultural criticism over the past several decades. In *Depression: A Public Feeling*—an autotheoretical text that in part explores this affective turn—Ann Cvetkovich writes, “I tend to use *affect* in a generic sense . . . as a category that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling, and that includes impulses [and] desires” (4). She notes that “at this point, theory and affect are not polarized or at odds with one another,” and clarifies that the Public Feelings project of which she has been a part “operates from the conviction that affective investment can be a starting point for theoretical insight and that theoretical insight does not deaden or flatten affective experience” (10).

This is born out in multiple autotheoretical projects. In *Testo Junkie*, for example, Paul B. Preciado writes, “I’m not interested in my emotions. . . in their individual aspects,” but rather in how they intersect and overlap with the emotions and experiences of others (11). Maggie Nelson writes in *The Argonauts* of her “interest in the personal made public” (60), and her work is—as one of my students observed—rhizomal and multi-nodal in its thinking. Through her recurrent thread referring to Barthes’ commentary on the ship *The Argo*, Nelson explores both the construction of an object’s meaning, and the subjectivity of self within a larger political context. “Nelson is good at talking about theory to you as though you understand it, until you do,” says one friend. “It’s not personal . . . but it’s also not universal.” There’s that place in the middle that theory can speak to: the particularities of experience, shared by at least some grouping of human animals.

In many ways, 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. In one discussion, a student commented that, after a “century of the self, using the self as the measure of all things,” autotheory could be seen as “a reaching back out, not just exalting the cleverness of theory or the lure of confessional work, but trying to establish connectivity, to cast a net instead of glorifying the self.” Or, as Young has put it:

[Autotheoretical texts, which] combine autobiography with theoretical reflection and with the authors' insistence on situating themselves within histories of oppression and resistance . . .

undermine the traditional autobiographical impulse to depict a life as unique and individual.

Instead, they present the lives they chronicle as deeply enmeshed in other lives, and in history, in power relations that operate on multiple levels simultaneously. (69)

Autotheory thus explores and interrogates both the subjective construction of self, and self's positionality within a larger context of power and politics. It is, in short, "invested in collective liberation" (Borst).

## Body

In "Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body," Kathy Acker writes,

Bodybuilding is about failure because bodybuilding, body growth and shaping, occurs in the face of . . . the body's inexorable movement toward its final failure, toward death. . . . For this reason, a bodybuilder's language is reduced to a minimal, even a closed, set of nouns and to numerical repetition, to one of the simplest of language games. Let us name this language game, *the language of the body*. (23)

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. It is no accident that this form has been so important for women—especially women of color—and nonbinary writers, Black writers, queer writers, and others with intersectional identities that have shaped their voices (often as "outsiders" in this institutionalized writing world). 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*. As such, autotheory could be seen as a methodology, a way of using bodily experience to gather knowledge. Acker continues, "By trying to control, to shape, my body through the calculated tools and methods of bodybuilding, and time and again,

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in following these methods, failing to do so, I am able to meet that which cannot be finally controlled and known: the body” (26). Autotheory argues, the physical and graphic details of my embodied life are just as important, just as ‘high-minded’ or elevated, as this theory I will hold up side-by-side. Autotheory says too: *all* theory is in fact based in someone else’s experience of their one particular body, though they have conveniently erased it from their theorizing and from their writing so as to seem like a disembodied brain, a neutral voice. In the words of Adrienne Rich: “When I write ‘the body’ I see nothing in particular. To write ‘my body’ plunges me into lived experience, particularity: I see scars, disfigurements, discolorations, damages, losses, as well as what pleases me . . . To say ‘the body’ lifts me away from what has given me a primary perspective. To say ‘my body’ reduces the tendency to grandiose assertions” (215).

There is immense political power here, in electing to show the frailties and fallibilities of the body, the mundane details of a life, in conjunction with the thinking—because, like social media’s perfect curation of a smiling happy life, and the social anxieties it creates, theory has long been a perfect, elite curation of the finest moments of the function of a brain, while hiding all the real lived experience of one particular set of causes and conditions which created that brain’s patterns of thinking—thus both disingenuously disguising the origins of the theorizing, but also creating an exclusive facade that tells those outsiders by academia, *you can’t do this kind of work*.

Autotheory steps in and intentionally contaminates all that theoretical purity with the messy, the wet, the dank of the hidden: of sex and of body. To come back once more to Acker:

In our culture, we simultaneously fetishize and disdain the athlete, a worker in the body. For we still live under the sign of Descartes. This sign is also the sign of patriarchy. As long as we continue to regard the body, that which is subject to change, chance, and death, as disgusting and inimical, so long shall we continue to regard our own selves as dangerous others. (27)

So one question we might ask of autotheory: What does it mean to write not only *in* but *through* the body?



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## Form

If autotheory is a way to put body back into the story—to hold it up beside brain, and to say *these things are not separate* (even the scientific field is becoming more and more aware that there no split between body and mind, and some science literature now uses the term *bodymind* to emphasize this point)—then what we have in the field of autotheory are not only works which manifest that conceptual melding of brain and body, but also texts that are formally or structurally mimetic of such commingling in other modes. These are texts that are often intergenre or hybrid, multi-media as well as interdisciplinary; they are texts that, in the words of Casey Charles, lend themselves “to generic disruptions” as they “question the fixity of categorical boundaries” in both creative work and theory.

Several of the texts mentioned in this essay, for example, are multimedia and use photography or drawings alongside text. Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* is divided into four parts (The Wake, The Ship, The Hold, and The Weather) and offers “a theory and a praxis of Black being in diaspora” (18); the black-and-white photographs she includes throughout range from photos of her own family, to photos of art and events she includes in her analysis. *Testo Junkie*, which alternates between chapters of personal narrative about physical transition as a “gender hacker,” and chapters of quite dense theory about the *pharmacopornographic* era in which we live, includes a smattering of hand-drawn sketches such as a diagram of the chemical structure of testosterone, and an outline-style diagram of “endocrinopolitics” (55, 57, 218). In *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Cvetkovich’s memoir section is visibly distinguished by the use of grey paper, while the analytical sections are printed on white; she includes a selection of color photographs of art by Sheila Pepe and Allyson Mitchell, as well as numerous black-and-white photos of other art.

And some autotheoretical works—such as Bhanu Kapil’s *Ban en Banlieu*, where she takes familiar structures such as end-notes and the dedication page and writes central content of her book into them—go beyond the implied dualism of hybridity to what could be called *free form*, a form which is “absent of

fixed structures, such as jazz or free verse poetry” (Reid 140)—or which, in Kapil’s case, takes known forms and stretches them, distorts them almost beyond recognition.

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A question that is often raised with such projects—projects which transgress categorical boundaries of discipline, genre, and medium—is the question of assessment. In her introduction to *American Hybrid*, a 2009 anthology of poetry and poetics, Cole Swenson suggests that “decentralizing influences...make it harder to achieve a consensual judgement or even to maintain critical criteria” and that rather, we must become stronger, more engaged readers: capable of innovating new criteria at the same pace of innovation we see in the creative field (xxv). One of the challenges autotheory presents us with is that the reader must be always engaged and always thinking. There is no safety in an external authority of theory or form.

Very often, however, these projects teach us—even explicitly, as in Brand, Sharpe, and Preciado’s projects—how to read the, how to understand what they are up to: their conceptual project. Dionne Brand writes, for example, “So far I’ve collected these fragments...disparate and sometimes only related by sound or intuition, vision or aesthetic. I have not visited the Door of No Return, but by relying on random shards of history and unwritten memoir of descendants of those who passed through it, including me, I am constructing a map of the region, paying attention to faces, to the unknowable, to unintended acts of returning, to impressions of doorways. . . .What interests me primarily is probing the Door of No Return as consciousness.” (19, 25) Preciado, too, instructs us in how to read his project, early on: “This book is not a memoir. This book is a testosterone-based, voluntary intoxication protocol...A body-essay. Fiction, actually. If things must be pushed to the extreme, this is a somato-political fiction, a theory of the self, or a self-theory.” (11)

One of the ways Sharpe teaches us how to read her project is through her use of keywords. “Significantly popularized by Raymond Williams as a way of making Marxist concepts more readily accessible for cultural analysis” (Cvetkovich 12), the keyword practice lends itself especially well to the

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realm of autotheory: it involves utilizing a central word—a *keyword*—with multiple connotations, “a word that is capable of bearing interlocking, yet sometimes contradictory and commonly contested contemporary meanings” (“What is a ‘Keyword’”) as the gathering premise of a project. Sharpe takes the word *wake* in its various and ranging meanings, harnessing its multiplicity—“keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening and consciousness”—and pairs *wake* with *work* “in order that we might make the wake and *wake work* our analytic. . . . wake work as a theory and praxis of the wake,” toward imagining “new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery’s afterlives” (18). Connecting these conceptual principles to her own life, after offering a section of personal narrative early on Sharpe writes, “I include the personal here to connect the social forces on a specific, particular family’s being in the wake to those of all Black people in the wake . . . I include the personal here in order to position this work, and myself, in and of the wake” (8). Thus *wake* and *wake work* become gathering principles of her autotheoretical work, but also concepts which are slippery, which can shift and morph throughout her project, are not overly defined or pinned down, and which can thus “contain multitudes.”

### **Multiplicity**

Autotheory offers us a kind of chimera: work that is interdisciplinary and, at its best, critically intersectional. It offers both subversion and transcendence of the boundaries around identity, around genre, around discipline and ways of knowing. The literary world has not always been—and too-often still is not—so open-minded. As Jenny Bouilly writes in “On the EEO Genre Sheet,”

It seems to me that the inability to accept a mixed piece of writing is akin to literary racism. . . . The term “other” also immediately connotes an agenda: if you don’t fit into one of our predetermined categories, well, then, you aren’t playing the game correctly. You are an other. You will always be an

other. . . . To be told to choose is to be told that you disrupt the neat notion of where things belong, that you don't belong.

In contrast, the field of autotheory allows not only for a multiplicity of form, of innovation, of medium, but also a multiplicity of experience, of perspective and embodied subjectivity. As Raili Marling argues, works of autotheory “are autobiographical texts that simultaneously interrogate theoretical issues and, by their genre liminality, seek to articulate otherwise muted phenomena.”

Take Bhanu Kapil's project in *Ban en Banlieu*, for example: a series of performance notes, installations, and errors, all revolving around a seemingly semi-autobiographical embodiment she calls Ban. Kapil at one point describes her project in this way:

Notes for a novel never written: a novel of the race riot: (Ban). As my contribution to a panel at the limits of the poetic project—its capacity: for embodiment, for figuration, for what happens to bodies when we link them to the time of the event, which is to say—unlived time, the part of time that can never belong to us—I would like to present: a list of the errors I made as a poet engaging a novel-shaped space. (20)

This is an autotheoretical endeavor that truly *metabolizes* the theory, makes it praxis in the creative act itself, and then documents that creative act in the writing; it is “a way to make visible something that was ‘no longer possible to say’” (Kapil 11)—a muted phenomena.

Kapil later says to Laynie Brown in an interview: “Syntax has the capacity to be subversive, to be very beautiful, to register an anti-colonial position: in this respect. I think of the semi-colon: how it faces backwards and is hooked, the very thing a content [shredded plastic] might be caught on. . . . Perhaps the poet's novel is a form that, in this sense, might be taken up [is] by writers of color, queer writers, writers who are thinking about the body in these other ways.” Here we might substitute *autotheory* for *poet's novel*—in this context, the project is similar: a disruption of the expectations of a given genre and mode of thinking, of representation.

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Kapil's work in *Ban en Banlieu* enacts the project of autotheory not through explicit commentary but through praxis—both in terms of its structure and syntax, and also in the sense that her project in *Ban en Banlieu* is not restricted to the page, but involved actual embodiment and performance rather than a single-moded commentary about the body.

## Rupture

*Is there a way in which autotheory can actually be inherently anti-feminist, one of my students asked, in that it seeks the through-line of outside expertise, outside authority, to justify its own thinking?*

Memoir, as a form, has historically been both feminized and disparaged, and writing with any element of the personal by a female or nonbinary author is very likely to be lumped into that category (though, as Cvetkovich notes, “Given how widespread the use of memoir is among this generation of feminists, it’s surprising that debate continues about its value as a critical mode” (75)). Autotheory, as my student pointed out, offers a way to be able to use some of that “personal” material, but to “raise it to another level where it may be better received.” So in that sense, one could look at autotheory as a response to an external and problematic system—but does it, by its response, in some way validate or uphold that system?

This question can be broadened beyond the lens of feminism: as one example, Sharpe describes the actual damage done to particular identities and communities by the racial failings and distortions of traditional theorizing:

For Black academics to produce legible work in the academy often means adhering to research methods that are ‘drafted into the service of a larger destructive force’ (Saunders), thereby doing violence to our own capacities to read, think, and imagine otherwise. . . we are often disciplined into thinking through and along lines that reinscribe our own annihilation . . . We must become

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undisciplined. The work we do requires new modes and methods of research and teaching; new ways of entering and leaving the archives of slavery. (13)

Taking one more step back to regard the entire field of autotheory, we could ask: Does autotheory function in similar ways to what Jen Soriano calls “intersectional form,” in her important essay “Multiplicity from the Margins”? Or does it, in fact, function in an opposite and opposed manner by invoking white/Western, institutionalized norms of intellectualizing at all? Soriano describes intersectional form as being “characterized by writing in which authors write their intersectional identities, experiences and perspectives onto the page.” She notes that “in the face of a dominant society that is largely non-intersectional and silencing, these authors create a new location that allows for such telling,” a voicing of identities and experiences that have previously, in the words of Kimberlé Crenshaw, “been relegated . . . to a location that resists telling” (as qtd in Soriano). The ensuing writing involves space, silences, and fracture; it “breaks away from the confines of traditional narrative arc and instead moves through fragments and strands and strips, conveying multiple viewpoints to reject homogenous truth in favor of a more complex reality” (Soriano).

Describing her project in *In the Wake*, for example, Christina Sharpe writes, “I am trying to find the language for this work, find the form for this work. Language and form fracture more every day” (19). Sharpe thus furthers the idea that intersectional form must by necessity include not only the plurality of voice and perspective, but also the sites where *what must be said* breaks apart, into the unspeakable or unsayable and then back again. Soriano concludes, “by bucking expectations of singular topic, narrative arc, and conclusive truth, intersectional form resists convention not just for the sake of experimentation, but for the sake of conveying and even modeling new ways of being in the world.” (Or, in Sharpe’s words, “I mean wake work to be a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives.” (18)) While I would not argue that all or even most autotheory is necessarily operating *in* intersectional form, the two clearly share some terrain in the larger hybrid field, and overlap in important

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ways, both pushing against convention *for the sake of conveying and even modeling new ways of being in the world*—and, I would add, modelling the value of new ways of thinking and knowing.

Thus, another question we might ask of autotheory: What does it look like to “metabolize” concepts directly out of one’s lived experience, rather than internalizing externally-developed concepts or constructs which may in fact be damaging to the sense of self? Or, in Sharpe’s conception of “theorizing through inhabitation”: how do we take these metabolized concepts—these new ways of knowing—and “live them in and as consciousness”?

### **Closing Thoughts**

We live in an era where our modes of learning have largely become spatial and associative rather than linear. In this sense, that the multimedia aspects of autotheory are invitational and appealing is little surprise; as someone observed in our class discussion, “Every art form is moved forward by the available technology—we’re used to reading things online, and we now want that kind of hybridity and synthesis in books, as well.” As the creative nonfiction field opens itself to a broader range of form and approach, it becomes more and more evident that readers have an appetite for this kind of hybrid or multimedia work.

When my students and I asked, *Why now?* of autotheory—why this groundswell now, why the interest in this type of work?—they noted that it feels very much of this time: the digital age, with its competing talking heads, alternate realities, and disinformation; the quickly-changing world, constantly confronting us with things that are outside our preexisting boxes, and pushing us to adapt. This is a moment that can feel very bewildering, in many ways, and in a sense autotheory offers to bring us back to the concrete, back to lived personal truths—but it also does something to help us expand those preexisting boxes, which may contribute to the real hunger we are seeing for this kind of work.

Autotheory makes a space for conversation more complex than the quick reactivity of this moment often allows for, a space on the page for a kind of thinking most of us have less and less time for;

and in particular, space on the page for questioning the authority of theory, while at the same time bringing body, physicality, and lived experience directly into the dialogue—especially critical to those of us who live in bodies or identities that have historically been marginalized, silenced, or ignored by the direct linearity of mainstream narrative.

As Fournier writes, “I approach auto-theory *as a practice of performing, embodying, enacting, processing, metabolizing, and reiterating philosophy, theory, and art criticism*. . . as an often self-reflexive and performative practice in the post-medial present.” (“Autotheory,” *emphasis mine*) In this sense, autotheory offers us the space to both embody and process conceptual ideas; and the name for, the categorical possibility of, a body of work produced in that process of metabolizing.

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