

Speak for Your Self: Psychoanalysis, Autotheory, and The Plural Self

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<ABSTRACT>

In this article, I explore the status of the self in autotheory, bringing Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* together with autotheory's most popular text, Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, to consider the movement in contemporary autotheory away from the split subject and toward of what I call a "plural self." Reading Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* as a species, *avant la lettre*, of autotheory, I chart how Freud's writing challenged the coherence of the self and introduced the now critically embraced theory of the split subject. While this theory has long been a favored tool for enabling critiques of the self, I claim that recent versions of autotheory have deliberately dispensed with the deconstructed split subject in order instead to construct a plural self. Reading *The Argonauts*, I consider how this plural self is motivated by a principally ethico-political desire to (re)imagine the self relationally, where self and other are reconfigured as collaborative and cumulative. Ultimately, this article asks what promise for relational solidarity a notion of the plural self holds, and where this promise might find its limit.

</ABSTRACT>

<EPI>"How can a book be both a free expression and a negotiation?"</EPI>

<EPIS>Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*</EPIS>

Despite his steadfast commitment to being a "man of science," Sigmund Freud had a knack for writing about himself. In prefaces, in footnotes, and in parenthetical asides, Freud freely employed allusions to his personal life to help explicate his theories of mind. While some texts like *Totem and Taboo* and *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes* contain sly references to Freud's rivalrous friendships and feuds, others like *Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy*, *The*

History of the Psychoanalytic Movement, and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* smuggle in narratives from his personal life to substantiate his theoretical excursions. As students of Freud's work learn early on, such autobiographical inclusions litter his writing and provide useful landmarks for making sense of some of his most significant concepts. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine ambivalence be without Eugen Bleuler; the Oedipus complex without Jacob Freud; bisexuality without Wilhelm Fleiss; or the death instinct without Sophie Freud.

Freud frequently acknowledged, in letters and in published texts, that self-narration was his own point of entry to what would become psychoanalysis. As Freud realized, *The Interpretation of Dreams*—that founding ur-text of the field—was essentially a form of experimental, autobiographical writing. However, this was hardly a comfortable recognition for Freud. In the original preface to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he anxiously justifies his autobiographical mode, explaining that

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The difficulties of presentation have been further increased by the peculiarities of the material which I have had to use to illustrate the interpreting of dreams. . . .

The only dreams open to my choice were my own But if I was to report my own dreams, it inevitably followed that I should have to reveal to the public gaze more of the intimacies of my mental life than I liked, or than is normally necessary for any writer who is a man of science and not a poet. Such was the painful but unavoidable necessity; and I have submitted to it rather than totally abandon the possibility of giving the evidence for my psychological findings.

(xxiii-xxiv)

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<P1>In this founding moment of psychoanalysis, Freud confronts the features of his work that seem to destabilize the divide between literature and science, requiring (as his work did) narrative methods far more common to poets and storytellers than to scientists. But rather than “totally abandon” his psychological discoveries when the requisite methods challenged the conventional notions of objectivity, Freud dug into the “peculiarities” of his work and embarked on a thoroughgoing analysis of own his dreams. He described this work as an “auto-analysis” and, in doing so, he proleptically joined the autobiographical to what would become the psychoanalytic. Using the technique of free association developed in clinical work with his patients, Freud picked apart accounts of his life and of his dreams, ultimately arriving at his revolutionary theory of the unconscious. Psychoanalysis is, in other words, a modern science born of Freud’s deconstruction of self-narration; it is a generalizable theory of mind catalyzed by Freud’s experiment with autobiography.

As I discuss throughout this article, such experimentation with self-narration provides one early example of the multiple ways that critical theory would, in the decades to come, reconfigure the relationship between the person of the author and her written texts. Recently, this impulse has (re)emerged in the genre of critical self-narration that Paul B. Preciado has called “autotheory.” A supposedly distinct, “genre defying” form of contemporary writing popularized by Maggie Nelson in the mid-2010s, autotheory has been hailed as an alternative to both autobiography and critical theory because of its delivery of a unique style of self-narration in which twentieth-century critical theory melds with representations of personal experience.¹ Yet, as Freud’s writing shows, some of the twentieth-century’s most important intellectual traditions—from cultural studies to queer theory, psychoanalysis to feminist standpoint epistemology, Audre Lorde to Roland Barthes—have emerged from similar re-narrativizations

of the self. In the first half of this article, I therefore consider how Freud's retooling of autobiography in *The Interpretation of Dreams* constitutes one genealogy of critical theory's longstanding challenge to the autonomous, cohesive self.² As I suggest, Freud's writings have not only been psychologically significant for their displacement of consciousness as the organizing force in daily life, but politically meaningful as a lens through which subsequent academics and clinicians have diagnosed and resisted the amplified demands for self-sovereignty and self-sufficiency that have accrued in the past century, including those that have accompanied the consolidation of neoliberalism in our own time. Through Freud's early, autotheoretical writing, he developed a theory of the split subject that would be an indispensable tool for critical theory's grappling with the self's various complicities for decades to come.

Freud's early experiment helps clarify the aspirational horizon of contemporary engagements with autotheory, which deliberately forego Freud's deconstructive critique of the self in favor of a narrative self-reconstruction. Many of the texts routinely affiliated with autotheory—from Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* or Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *A Lover's Discourse* to Maggie Nelson's own *The Argonauts*—distinguish their autobiographical experiments by dilating the function of the self in narrative, incorporating the textual excerpts of friends, lovers, and critical theorists alike in a textual assemblage and thereby trafficking in what Robyn Wiegman, in the introduction to this special issue, calls the "extended personal." In the second half of this article, I elaborate this tendency toward narrative self-extension by reading one of autotheory's most popular texts, *The Argonauts*, arguing that Nelson constructs a *plural self* in that text as a literary avatar designed to pay homage to the inter-relational contours of the self. I argue that Nelson's much-noted formalist innovations, including textual italicizations and marginal citations, strategically craft a narrative self that is not so much undone as it is remade,

pluralized through its multiple textual incorporations of the other. As I discuss, this plural self is animated by a principally ethico-political desire to (re)imagine the self as capable of relational solidarity wherein self and other are seen as collaborative and cumulative, productive of a plurality rather than riven by an unconscious conflict. Through this article I therefore consider how the autotheoretical plural self aspires to a narrative non-singularity as a means to enacting relational justice. In an intellectual and political context where past forms of ideology critique and demystification (including those that draw on the legacies of Freudian psychoanalysis) seem suddenly inadequate to the task of (re)imagining a more just self and society, what promise of relational solidarity does the plural self hold? And what, I ask, are its limits?

<A>Unwriting the Self: Autobiography, Auto-Analysis, and the Split Subject

Freud began work on *The Interpretation of Dreams*, arguably his most autobiographical text, in 1895.³ Yet, despite the text being “finished in all essentials” by 1896, Freud delayed publication until 1900, commenting in 1925 that both *The Interpretation of Dreams* and his Dora case “were suppressed by me—if not for the nine years enjoined by Horace—at all events for four or five years before I allowed them to be published” (248).⁴

As Freud’s reference to Horace’s rules of poetry suggests, his suppression of *The Interpretation of Dreams* had less to do with any deep conceptual struggles than it did with the self-narration the project seemed to require. Since Freud found that the only dreams he could analyze with a sufficient level of detail and transparency were his own, he realized that *The Interpretation of Dreams* could not help but be thoroughly personal and autobiographical—even as he worked tirelessly to develop a universalizable theory of mental functioning. Reading Freud as a memoirist, Madelon Sprengnether notes that in *The Interpretation of Dreams* “Freud made use of self-writing . . . to provide the basis of theory” (218).

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Psychoanalysis, in Freud's theory and practice, emerged from his profound self-interrogation at a moment of life-crisis [following the death of Freud's father in 1896] and as such constitutes a unique form of autobiography—one that he represented as universal in its application. Occasionally, in his desire to put his ideas forward in a neutral, disinterested, or scientific way, he disguised the extent to which his illustrative material was drawn from his own experience. (232)⁵

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<P1> Freud experienced a conflicted relationship with *The Interpretation of Dreams* throughout his career. He continually revised the text, producing eight different editions whose layered amendments create a palimpsest.⁶ According to Ilse Grubrich-Smiths, "the main reason for Freud's conflictual attitude seems to have been the self-analytic, that is, the subjective origin of most of the insights contained in his *magnum opus*" (25). Like Grubrich-Smiths, many Freud scholars (including Didier Anzieu, Peter Gay, and John Forrester) have documented Freud's personal and disciplinary anxieties about drawing so deeply on personal experience in his writing. Desiring inclusion within a scientific community that saw stark divisions between the subjective (read: unreliable) and the objective (read: universally valid), Freud thought his autobiographical style of writing jeopardized the text's validity. As a consequence, Freud made repeated attempts to universalize even the most personal aspects of his own life—as he did, for instance, when he acknowledged in the preface to the second edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams* that the book contained "a portion of my own self-analysis, my reaction to my father's death," only then to universalize this confession by then claiming that any such event would, naturally, be "the most important event, the most poignant loss, of a man's life" (xxvi). In this

universalization of the personal, Freud made self-narration foundational to much of his work, even as he resisted it.

Yet Freud's style of self-narration was unconventional; it challenged many of the narrative and epistemological precepts of standard autobiography. While *The Interpretation of Dreams* is littered with personal anecdotes, these stories are often unrecognizable as conventional autobiography. Significantly, it was in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that Freud proposed a new way of thinking about psychic life as fundamentally split, moving from the idioms of "self" and "individual" to those now-familiar neologisms "conscious," "preconscious," and "unconscious." More than a simple shift in vocabulary, these new terms introduced a model of mind structured principally by conflict and occlusion rather than will, intention, or consciousness. By elaborating his theories of primary and secondary processes, manifest and latent content, the topographical model, and the Oedipus Complex, Freud proposed what has become the signature feature of his theory: that the mind was a divided entity governed principally by unconscious operations. In doing so, he suggested that the conscious, unified self is a fiction constructed through a variety of introjections and repressions; subjectivity, Freud proposed, is a much broader category encompassing a whole range of unconscious conflicts and divisions. Put another way, by engaging in a form of autotheoretical writing in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud invented the split subject.

Whatever critics may think about Freud's theory of the split subject and the unconscious generally—and critics have run the gamut in their creative (mis)uses of it, from Deleuze and Guattari's historical materialist rereading of libidinal investments in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* to contemporary neuroscientific inscriptions of unconscious life within brain matter and cerebral functioning—the de-prioritization of consciousness had a transformative

effect on Freud's engagement with self-narration in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Because Freud sought to evidence the unconscious (rather than the conscious) mind, he did not simply record snippets from his dreams, memories, and experiences to construct a coherent narrative version of himself. In fact, he worked against the conventional bildungsroman style of autobiography by using an interpretative method he was just coming to call "free association." Less an idealized form of free speech than the rigorous pursuit of the chain of associations conjured up by each aspect of the dream narrative, Freud subjected each of his personal anecdotes to an unwavering analytic anatomization, pulling back their already-compromising veneer to reveal an even less savory truth beneath. Freud was typically ruthless in these analyses of himself as he combed through the seeming pleasantries of the manifest content in hot pursuit of latent rivalries, aggressions, and desires. Freud's writing in *The Interpretation of Dreams* is thus both a telling and an untelling of himself that ultimately displaces his own narrative agency. In *The Dream of Irma's Injection*, *The Rome Dreams*, and *The Dream of the 'Botanical Monograph'*, for instance, Freud both narrated and to some extent de-narrativized his dreams, breaking them down into component parts that destabilized the coherence of the self of conventional autobiography. In other words, it was only by dismembering his accounts of himself that he could follow the thread of the unconscious. Rather than an autobiography, Freud's work might better be seen as an autotheory of the split subject. As Adam Phillips observes, "psychoanalysis is autobiography by *other* means" (71).

Readers of *The Interpretation of Dreams* get a clear picture of this nascent autotheoretical treatment of self-narration in one of Freud's dreams, which he recorded in May of 1899, just as he finished work on his magnum opus. In what has become known as *The Dream of Self-*

Dissection, Freud recalls how he dreamt that he was in a dissecting room with his former teacher, “Old Brücke.” Explains Freud:

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Old Brücke must have set me some task; *strangely enough*, it related to a dissection of the lower part of my own body, my pelvis and legs, which I saw before me as though in a dissecting-room, but without noticing their absence in myself and also without a trace of any gruesome feeling. Louise N. was standing beside me and doing the work with me. The pelvis had been eviscerated, and it was visible now in its superior, now in its inferior, aspect, the two being mixed together. Thick flesh-colored protuberances (which, in the dream itself, made me think of hemorrhoids) could be seen. (459-60)

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<P1>Freud interpreted this dream of self-dissection using his free-associative technique, linking it to castration anxiety, femininity and sexual difference, death and (im)mortality, and science and literature. But as Freud quickly realized, the core of this dream-scene had a deeper meaning to do with *The Interpretation of Dreams* itself. On Freud’s reading, “the dissection meant the self-analysis which I was carrying out, as it were, in the publication of this present book about dreams—a process which had been so distressing to me in reality that I had postponed the printing of the finished manuscript for more than a year” (483). In this dream, the personal work of self-analysis collapses into the professional activity of self-dissection. With this collapse, the dream dutifully registers Freud’s anxiety about self-exposure—namely, his fear that *The Interpretation of Dreams* would reveal his most private parts to the public eye.

But the dream also, and more importantly, speaks to Freud's concern about the self-undoing protocols of the psychoanalytic method he was inventing. On the face of it, Freud's dream seems to him one of grotesque horror. It compels him to a nauseating self-vivisection, and then takes a set of increasingly macabre turns until Freud eventually finds himself standing in his own grave. As Freud begins his analysis, however, he comes to realize that, gruesome though the manifest content of the dream was, it actually concealed a much more cheerful latent content. Linking different parts of the dream to his waking life—and notably to Louise N.'s teasing joke that Freud would never get around to publishing his own "immortal works"—Freud concludes that the seeming horror of the dream actually masks a wish (461). According to Freud, the dream revealed his own desire for nothing short of professional and intellectual immortality. Although a predictable conclusion for those of us steeped in Freud's wish-fulfillment theory, for Freud the recognition that his ghastly dream represented a kind of Oedipal conquest was jarring. By unflinchingly following the unconscious associations of each part of the dream, Freud's analysis was therefore not so much constructing his self through narrative as it was performing an experimental vivisection of self-narration, unspooling the coherence of the stories he was inclined to tell about himself. The dream thus registers Freud's autotheoretical project of self-decomposition, unwriting his self along the line between life and death, conscious and unconscious. Put another way, in inventing psychoanalysis Freud did not capitulate to the narrative conventions of autobiography; rather, in writing an autotheory of the split subject, he thoroughly unraveled them.

Admittedly, this reading of what I am describing as the self-undoing tendencies in *The Interpretation of Dreams* takes up one side in what is, for many, a now-familiar debate about the narrative aims of the psychoanalytic enterprise. As with many of Freud's more radical concepts

(like the death instinct) that divided his followers, psychoanalysis's relation to self-narration has been a contentious topic. While some analysts and critics have insisted on psychoanalysis's principally autobiographical aspirations, others have maintained its importance as a project of self-undoing. In the first camp are those who assert a fundamental continuity between psychoanalysis and autobiography, typically hitching this argument to the idea that a fuller, more complete, and more coherent story of one's self is integral to the achievement of, if not a cure, then at very least a more authentic and satisfying life.⁷ This affinity is well documented by the proliferation of psychoanalytically-informed memoirs throughout the twentieth century, beginning with the poet H.D. who wrote one of the first—and still most famous—accounts of her analysis with Freud, and tracking through Theodore Reik's *Fragment of the Great Confession*, Marion Milner's Woolfian *A Life of One's Own*, and Wilfred Bion's colossal three-volume work of autobiographical science fiction *A Memoir of the Future*. More contemporarily, Dan Gunn, in *Wool Gathering, or How I Ended Analysis*, chronicles his final weeks with his tightlipped Lacanian analyst, who he coyly calls the "Sargent," while Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* weaves her fraught relationship with her mother together with her Winnicottian psychotherapy. Even Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love* is a memoir structured principally by her experience of psychotherapy. This mushrooming of specifically psychoanalytic autobiographies prompted Maud Ellmann to observe that

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Freud's self-analysis could be seen as both cause and symptom of the autobiographical explosion that began with high modernism and still reverberates in today's popular culture, where memoirs regularly outsell fiction and TV viewers flock to the tell-all confessions of the Oprah Winfrey show. (313)

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<P1>In this view, psychoanalysis is an exercise in autobiographical self-narration: it is tantamount to a practice of self-telling that privileges the past as the prime site for the authentic recuperation of truth. Here, narrative becomes a means for the consolidation of the self, and psychoanalysis offers one potential framework within which this consolidation is authorized.

But this view overstates the cooperation of psychoanalysis and autobiography. For however much Freud narrated his own experiences, his pursuit of the unconscious ultimately made untenable any claims to psychoanalysis being a properly autobiographical endeavor. As critic Julie Walsh has argued, “as a discourse of the divided subject, psychoanalysis thoroughly disrupts the image of a coherent narrator who is in command of her use of language from a position of one remove” (9). Indeed, this angling toward the unconscious and away from the cozy coordinates of a singular, coherent, and autonomous self is why Freud proposed free association as psychoanalysis’s indispensable method.⁸ Instead of the conventions of plot, interiority, chronological self-development, and narrative coherence, free association favors discontinuity, condensation, displacement, *nachtraeglichkeit*, overdetermination, parapraxes, and slips of the tongue. A seemingly simple mandate, free association requires only that the patient speak her thoughts, regardless of their social acceptability or narrative coherence. Simple though it may at first seem, many of Freud’s followers quickly realized the difficulty of this methodological demand to speak against self-coherence. More often than not, patients’ unconscious repressions or superegoic censures imposed narrative coherence, undermining a true stream-of-consciousness associative process. As Sandor Ferenczi remarked, “the patient is not cured by free associating; he is cured when he can free associate” (qtd. in Phillips 67). Here, Ferenczi suggests just how radical Freud’s anti-narrative method was in its stipulation that

patients speak about themselves in this new, anti-autobiographical way. By deconstructing narrative coherence and showcasing the trouble inherent in all enactments of self-narration, free association speaks to the fact that, for Freud, there is something suspect about all the stories we tell about what is conventionally called our self.

To this end, I think it is important to read Freud's equivocation over the role of self-narration in *The Interpretation of Dreams* as not just a symptom of his desire to be accepted by a scientific community that revered objectivity. Rather, it constitutes a recognition of the paradox that his work on dreams revealed: that psychoanalytic writing is decidedly focused on the self even as it is dedicated to deconstructing the ostensible coherence of that self. Put another way, psychoanalysis simultaneously advances one of the most nuanced and inventive theories of modern selfhood while showcasing, through narrative dispersal, that same self's fictional constitution. Psychoanalysis is not just a theory of the self, but also a kind of program for unspeaking the self, a word-of-mouth autobiography that announces the fictionality of its own enunciation: an autotheory, *avant la lettre*.

Adopting this understanding of the problem inherent in self-narration has serious consequences for any project engaged in telling the story of a life. How, for instance, can one commit to an act of self-narration if one takes seriously the risk of strengthening, not upending, the ego's tendency toward managerial self-sovereignty? In the wake of psychoanalysis's theory of the split subject, is there a way to write the self that does not confirm the fantasy of conscious, coherent self-knowing? Certainly, these are not new questions for students of twentieth-century critical theory who have cut their teeth on theories of ideology and the protocols of its demystification. As critics like Eva Illouz, Nikolas Rose, and Eli Zaretsky have argued, the contemporary embrace so-called self-psychology can be understood as one arm of a greater

neoliberal machine that positions the self as a matter of individual authorship and control, enjoining subjects (in a thoroughly free-market logic) to ceaselessly invest in their own self-making as a means to achieving emotional stability, satisfaction, and security. Keeping in mind Ellmann's observation that self-focused genres like memoir and autobiography have seen a meteoric rise in popularity in Anglophone consumer-driven publishing in the last twenty years, it would seem that any investment in re-upping the autobiographical self is hardly separable from the commodification of the self under late-capitalism. This, at least, is the familiar story.

Accepting this critique as true—which, to a large extent, I do—I am nevertheless interested in thinking through the appeal of the recently-branded autotheory for a contemporary generation of artists and academics well-schooled in neoliberalism's alleged trappings. One of my abiding suspicions here is that, in its refusal of both conventional autobiographical and psychoanalytic styles of self-narration, autotheory enacts a wish for an ethico-political form of self-writing *not* bound up with the reproduction of neoliberal individualism's violences. In the next section of this article, I thus take up one of contemporary autotheory's best-selling texts, *The Argonauts*, to explore how Nelson tries to upend the individualizing effects of autobiography specifically by pluralizing the self and thereby challenging the assumed singularity of the first-person address. While Freud's reconceptualization of the self emerged from his proposal of the conscious/unconscious divide, Nelson's autotheoretical innovation comes, I argue, from her interrogation of the self/other relation as the grounding from which she aspires toward a *plural self*.

<A>If Two Could Write: Autotheory and The Plural Self

In an interview that Maggie Nelson gave for a “Stories of the Self” essay series in *Believer Magazine*, she explains the importance of the self for understanding her work of autotheory, *The Argonauts*. According to Nelson, in conventional memoir and autobiography,

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you’re presumed to have a self and that self is presumed to have . . . experiences, which you then document. . . . I think it’s inevitable that a book with a front and back cover is going to present a congealment of the self, it’s going to produce a sound, it’s going to produce a style, it’s going to produce an impression. But I think in the writing of it, there can be a very valuable interplay between possession and dispossession of the self that you can feel and maybe even get onto the page.

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<P1>Having adopted the term “autotheory” from Paul B. Preciado’s 2008 experimental trans “body-essay,” *Testo Junkie* (first published in English in 2013), Nelson describes her writing as rearticulating the relationship between theory and the self, productively blurring the line between a theory of the self and a theory performed or enacted by the self. Distrustful of the essentializing, self-possessive pretenses of much autobiographical memoir, Nelson aims curates a version of the self as a kind of performative enactment meant to reconceptualize the self’s boundaries. “I’m always looking for terms that are not ‘memoir,’” comments Nelson in an interview, “to describe autobiographical writing that exceeds the boundaries of the ‘personal.’”⁹ Following the familiar feminist motto that the “personal is political,” Nelson describes how her work of autotheory strives toward a narrative self that exceeds the limits of her own person. “I don’t make a big distinction between writing about ‘myself’ and writing about ‘larger issues’,”

Nelson appends (“Riding the Blinds”). By refusing this distinction, Nelson deliberately departs from the conventions of autobiography, which (as Freud would say) typically perform a kind of “narrative smoothing” in order to create a coherent story and generate the illusion of an autonomous self. Nelson means to write the self, certainly—but in a way that opens its borders, “exceed[ing] the boundaries of the ‘personal’,” as she puts it. Challenging fictions of essentialized selfhood and singular self-possession is thus central to Nelson’s understanding of autotheory, even as a persisting interest in and focus on the performativity of the self continues to orient her writing. Autotheory holds the promise, for Nelson, of constructing a self dis/possessed.

Yet, the engagement with the self that Nelson describes is manifestly different from Freud’s experiment a century earlier. Without doubt, *The Interpretation of Dreams* similarly blends the autobiographical with the theoretical, producing a creative instance of what we could, retrospectively, call “autotheory.” But Freud’s faith in the unconscious meant that it was only through the self’s devolution that he could evidence his propositions about the unconscious. His critique, famously, was of our inability to ever fully speak for our self. For Freud, the importance of speaking was precisely that it displaced the coherent self, gesturing instead toward the split in subjectivity produced by the unconscious. While Nelson entertains a similar skepticism about the trappings of autobiography, her concern focuses more on the relational capacities of the self than on the unconscious. Indeed, Nelson routinely and explicitly distances herself from much standard psychoanalytic thinking, calling Freud “freighted,” Klein “morbid,” and Lacan “heavy-handed” (*The Argonauts* 20). The only psychoanalytic thinker Nelson records any feeling of kinship with in *The Argonauts* is D.W. Winnicott, whose prioritization of the everyday, the ordinary, and the good enough mirrors Nelson’s Wittgensteinian embrace of the ordinary and sufficient capacities

of language. “One of the most loveable aspects of Winnicott’s writing on children,” reflect Nelson, “is his deployment of an ‘ordinary language’ seemingly incapable of histrionics even as it discusses issues of maximum complexity and gravity” (44). Famous for thinking and speaking in his own idiom, Winnicott often forewent the standard psychoanalytic jargon of “the subject,” “the ego,” and “the unconscious,” embracing instead quotidian formulations like “the self,” “the individual,” and even “the baby.” In this, he shifted the unconscious and its inexorable conflicts to the background in favor of attending to the terrain of interpersonal relations, which he newly reimagined as the space for self-generation.

Thus, when Nelson quips that “One of this book’s titles, in an alternate universe: *Why Winnicott Now?*” she announces something of the particularly relational stakes of her autotheoretical project, which constructs a plural self as an aspirational gesture toward relational solidarity (19). Like Winnicott, Nelson finds the autonomous liberal individualistic self insufficient—but insufficient not because it elides any truth of the unconscious split in our subjectivity but rather because it misrecognizes the extent to which selfhood is only ever possible through a piecemeal borrowing from others. In response, Nelson strategically crafts a self that, as Walt Whitman has famously written, “contains multitudes”—that is, a plurality. By using deconstructive formalist techniques like editing in italicized text from other writers and citing theorists and friends in the margins, Nelson fashions an autotheoretical self that strives for a collaboration, that tries to recognize the constitutive role of the other in our everyday self-compositions. Nelson’s autotheoretical intervention is thus to situate *The Argonauts* as a principally ethico-political rather than hermeneutic and epistemological project. In moving away from the split subject, Nelson’s autotheoretical writing is motivated by an ethico-political desire to reconceptualize the relational dimensions of selfhood through the narrative composition of a

plural self as a counterpoint to the persistent hegemony of liberal individualism. Focusing specifically on the ethico-political aspects of inter-relationality, Nelson constructs a narrative avatar that is a non-singular persona, a self conjugated in the plural.

On a narrative level, this is an important task for *The Argonauts* because of how interpersonal relationality sits at the heart of the book's subject matter. Since *The Argonauts* is a chronicle of Nelson's relationship with her lover, Harry, of Harry's gender transition, and of her own pregnancy, the text is an ode to how self-identity can only ever be constituted through the self's relation to an other. Through *The Argonauts*, Nelson therefore grapples with the ethical complexity of trying to engage in a kind of self-narration that necessarily implicates those others. This point is brought home to Nelson when, midway through the text, she recounts finishing a first draft of the book. Eager to have Harry's opinion on it, gives it to him to read. Later that day, she arrives home from work to find him in a state of "quiet ire." They go out to lunch the next day to discuss it.

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At lunch, he tells me he feels unbeheld—unheld, even. I know this is a terrible feeling. We go through the draft page by page, mechanical pencils in hand, with him suggesting ways I might facet my representation of him, of us. I try to listen, try to focus on his generosity in letting me write about him at all. . . . But nothing can substantively quell my inner defense attorney. *How can a book be both a free expression and a negotiation? Is it not idle to fault a net for having holes?* (46)

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<P1>What follows this section is something like a dialogue, a debate, between Nelson and Harry about the ethics of self-narration. As Harry vies for a project that "bear[s] adequate witness to

me, to us,” Nelson struggles with her desire to have her writing be her own, true first and foremost to her own sense of self. “I guess I wasn’t ready,” Nelson writes about her anxiety at the prospect of future co-authorship with Harry, “to lose sight of *my own me* yet, as for so long, writing has been the only place I have felt it plausible to find it (whatever “it” is)” (47).

This is a pivotal passage for understanding Nelson’s ethical aspirations for autotheory since it captures her desire for and faith in the “auto”—putting that elusive “*my own me*” at the center of her narrative venture—while simultaneously registering her attempt to pay homage to how any act of self-constitution necessarily involves others. With Nelson’s writing of *The Argonauts* comes her desire to reimagine how a story ostensibly about the singular self must also be structured by and accountable to the external world, be it through another person, a fetus, or an ideal. For Nelson, *The Argonauts* is therefore both an ethical and political project. Thought ethically, the major narrative focal points throughout the text—Harry’s transition, Nelson’s pregnancy, the death of Harry’s mother—all concern how self-identity is entirely dependent on the unstable boundary between people, both psychologically and physically understood. Because each person is born into the world through the body of another, each is ontologically, physically, and psychically defined by something or someone outside of the self. Winnicott’s transitional object theory of individuation, for instance, is an account of how the infant only gradually comes to distinguish itself from the mother through a process of borrowing and re-creation in an intermediate space of illusion. Like Winnicott, Nelson realizes that this means that all questions of selfhood are inherently ethical, (inter)relational considerations. All acts of self-composition necessarily draw on, borrow from, and recreate others in and through the self. This ethical dilemma becomes especially pronounced in Nelson’s relationship to Harry, since he directly negotiates with Nelson’s representation of him. Anna Ioanes observes in her analysis of *The*

Argonauts that “one of the tensions in the book concerns Nelson’s ability (narratively and ethically) to tell a story that is Harry’s, too” (“Scroll+Assemble+Repair”). Although focused on a particular instance, Ioanes’s comment acknowledges how significant the ethical stakes of self-narration are for Nelson’s work of autotheory in its entirety. In any attempt to speak for her self, Nelson’s work also necessarily speaks to and for countless other people.

But, insofar as Nelson’s work explores how self-narration intersects with more abstract concepts and categories, especially those to do with identity, it is also an avowedly political exercise. Early on in her relationship with Harry, an acquaintance—“(presumably straight, or at least straight-married)” —turns to Nelson at a dinner party and asks her: “So, have you been with other women, before Harry?” (*The Argonauts* 8). Since Harry’s gender identity is hardly a given even before his transition, the question disorients Nelson, who is suddenly forced to wrestle with how to locate Harry’s identity and, consequently, her own. As Nelson recognizes, any self-representation, any self-narration, of her individual experience and relationship necessarily slots into larger political categories, making Harry either a woman and Nelson a lesbian, or Harry a man and Nelson . . . straight? Nelson acknowledges that in first meeting Harry she had “become a quick study in pronoun avoidance” as a stopgap for having to confront both the insufficiency of language and its inherent politicality (7). But confront it Nelson does, and throughout *The Argonauts* Harry is pronominalized “he” alongside Nelson’s persisting narrativized surprise and discomfort at finding herself suddenly heterosexualized. In this way, Nelson’s autotheoretical experiments with genre-bending are inseparable from the politicized gender-bending that the text describes. If Nelson aspires toward a kind of self-narration capable of exceeding the personal through a pluralization of the self, then it is principally ethical and political tensions like these that motivate it.

Nelson attempts to address—or even to redress—these tensions through the formalist experimentation found throughout the text, including non-chronological, non-linear narration, floating marginal citations, and textual incorporations that together work to pluralize her authorial voice. Throughout *The Argonauts*, Nelson intersperses her plain text with italicized selections of writing often accompanied by a proper name set adjacent to them in the margins. In doing so, she creates an ambiguous, open relation between the proper name and the italicized text. Are these direct quotes, readers wonder? Paraphrases? Nelson’s own words? This stylization recalls the citational practice of academic writing with the wide margins functioning as a kind of non-specific, horizontal footnote. Robyn Wiegman observes that “Nelson integrates words and phrases from numerous thinkers into the text, often without attribution, thereby referencing while upending the formal practice of academic legitimation” (210). Jackie Stacey notes that this style “assume[s] a great deal of cultural capital” since readers have to be versed enough in the lore of insider academia and the avant garde art scene to fully grasp its many references (204). These disruptions of an integral narrative voice and Nelson’s myriad other nods to late-twentieth-century critical theory do not, however, serve to deconstruct the self (as would have been the case in Freudian and Lacanian inspired versions of post-structuralism) but rather to reconstruct a pluralized self.

My suggestion here is that the necessity of *The Argonauts* formal experimentation only becomes apparent when understood in conversation with the relational stakes of selfhood that the text grapples with narratively. By incorporating the writing of others and by refusing to clarify the relationship between the marginal citations and the italicized text, Nelson constructs a polyvocal, pluralistic self as a broader strategy for reimagining a self outside of (neo)liberalisms individualizing violences—that is, she composes a plural self as a gesture toward relational

justice where self and other are seen as collaborative and cumulative, productive of a plurality. Incorporating frequent references to friends, colleagues, and lovers alike, Nelson even cuts in long sections of Harry's writing about his mother's death in his own first-person voice. In these passages, Nelson juxtaposes her experience giving birth to Iggy with Harry's description of his mother's death, two instances of self-narration carefully positioned at the boundary with the (m)other. Here, Nelson is explicitly pluralizing her narrative self; she is not so much relinquishing the "my own me" as expanding it, right at the boundary of life and death, as it constellates around the open borders of the mother's body. While Freud's theory of the split subject had come through his mournful writing in response to his father's death, Nelson's convocation of the plural self comes through the flux between the birth and death of the mother. The resulting text oscillates non-chronologically between Nelson's plain text description of giving birth to her son, Iggy, and Harry's italicized account of his mother's death:

<EXT-RETAIN MARGINAL FORMATTING>

"I grow very quiet and concentrated. Counting, counting. Jessica says breathe into the bottom and I can tell that's where the baby is.

each of the volunteers told me that my job was to let my mom know that it was okay to go. i believe that i was pretty unconvincing for the first 33 hours of my time with her.

Harry

...

at a certain point i woke up. i listened for her breath, which i heard after a moment. much shallower, faster. ... her eyes were open now, illuminated, looking up, her mouth was now closed, her face no longer tilted, akimbo. she was

Harry

beautiful. and dying. ... i never wanted it to end. i have never wanted infinity to open up under an instant like i wanted that then. and then her eyes relaxed and her shoulders relaxed of a piece. and i knew she had found her way... i looked at the clock it was 2:16.

Suddenly, the urge to push. Everyone is thrilled. Push, they say. They teach me. Hold it in, hold in the air, bear down wildly, don't waste the end of the push. . . .

On the fourth or so contraction, he starts to come. I don't know for sure if it's him, but I can feel the change. I push hard. One push turns into another kind of push—I feel it outside.

And then, suddenly, Iggy. Here he comes onto me, rising. He is perfect, he is right. I notice he has my mouth, incredible. He is my gentle friend. He is on me, screaming.

. . .

I look at the clock; it is 3:45am.

(Nelson 131-33)

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<P1>On the face of it, this polyvocal narrative incorporation would seem to offer a straight answer to Nelson's question, "*How can a book be both a free expression and a negotiation?*" (46). Paralleling the mother's experiences of birth and death, Nelson's editorial decision to splice in selections of Harry's own authorial "I" expands the boundaries of *The Argonauts'* narrator,

seemingly giving both Nelson and Harry the freedom of self-expression. The oscillation between the “I” and the “i” creates an authorial layering in which Nelson’s text porously intersects with Harry’s, thus pluralizing the self at the center of the narrative and rendering multiple enunciating “I”s. Through italicization and differences of capitalization, Nelson suggests both symmetry and difference within the two accounts of selfhood, which rely on and modify one another. By incorporating what seems to be Harry’s text—but maintaining control of how that text is edited and cut in—Nelson ultimately introduces a question about where one self-narration stops and the other begins, leaving unclear exactly how many voices Nelson contains.

These passages seem to function as Nelson’s direct attempt to resolve Harry’s personal dissatisfaction with her representation of him, of them. But this question about the boundaries of self-narration is actually a much broader one that can be asked of the entire text since similar selections of italicized text and marginal citations pluralistically disperse the autobiographical self from start to finish. In each instance where Nelson samples another writer’s text, or even simply offers a summary of it, she seems to speak through another’s words, suggesting that her ostensibly singular self is actually defined through—inclusive of—an other. From this perspective, Nelson’s disagreement with Harry functions as a motif of the text, which aspires to redress the ethico-political shortcoming of the autonomous autobiographical self through a style of narrative self-pluralization.

Few among us could fault such a wish, especially insofar as these literary-philosophical movements toward a plural self arrive alongside a palpable rejuvenation of interest in the critical potential of the autoethnographic, the autofictional, and the critical memoir. Even as Nelson is autotheory’s most famous affiliate and *The Argonauts* its privileged text, she is not the only contemporary writer or artist whose work pursues a similar autotheoretical pluralization of the

self. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in *A Dialogue on Love*, narrates her experience of cancer and psychotherapy through an assemblage of journaling, poetry, and her therapist's edited notes, thereby capturing multiple versions of a self through this bricolage compilation.¹⁰ Similarly, Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* (1997) is composed through an epistolary exchange in which Chris and her partner, Sylvère, write letters, both posted and not, to the enigmatic object of her/their desire, "Dick." In doing so, they construct what Annamarie Jagose and Lee Wallace, in their own contribution to this special issue, call "the coupled voice," a descriptor that extends the recent queer and feminist rethinking of "the couple" form as seen in the recent special issues of *GLQ* (Brilmyer et al.) and *Women & Performance* (Stewart et al.). Although each of these potentially autotheoretical projects is unique, they share a recognizable authorial pluralization, which mobilizes some of the formal stylistics of deconstruction but uses them in the service of multiplying and pluralizing the autobiographical self, implicitly locating a tenuous "we" in the very place where the "I" is expected to announce itself. Always on the side of the both/and rather than the either/or, *The Argonauts* is thus a form of autotheory assembled through the multiple, conjugated in the plural.

Recognizable in this trend is a familiar and (to my mind) quite relatable desire to (re)write the self with a focus on ethico-political forms of relationality as one piece of an attempt to imagine a more just self and society. In the wake of a felt exhaustion with past forms of ideology critique and demystification (including those that draw on the legacies of Freudian and Lacanian theories of self-alienation) which, for all their diagnostic prowess, seem insufficient to the task of inaugurating a revolution in our personal structures of feeling, there is a deep appeal of an autotheoretical mode that shifts the frame of engagement to an inter-relational—and often even interpersonal—*both/and* sensibility. On Nelson's own analysis, her work means to be both

a negotiation and a free expression, to be simultaneously a self-possession and self-dispossession through its textual incorporation of the other. The attraction here is an easy one to recognize since the promise, essentially, is that (critically speaking) we can both eat our cake and have it too. The autotheoretical self can be at once an authentically felt “my own me” and a genuine, non-appropriative embrace of the other.

However, sympathetic though I am with Nelson’s aspiration for a form of relational solidarity, I want to suggest that this retooling of the self finds its limit when it is taken as securing (rather than simply desiring) a just relational collaboration. There is something of this flavor in Ioanes’s conclusion that Nelson’s writing is reparative precisely because it incorporates sections of Harry’s text: “The ethical problematic” in the text, surmises Ioanes, “is at least partly resolved when Nelson gives space to Harry to speak for himself.” While much hinges on the equivocating “partly” here, I am nevertheless suspicious of the conviction that anything is necessarily resolved or repaired through the pluralization of the self that occurs when Nelson selectively drafts in others’ text. Not only is it uncertain that Harry is actually speaking for himself here since the passages attributed to him could have been edited in any number of ways, or even fictionalized in their entirety. But even if there was some way of finally guaranteeing the originality of the authorship, it nevertheless remains the case that these passages—and indeed all the various italicizations and nominal invocations throughout *The Argonauts*—are spliced in by Nelson, in the service of her own self-creation. I therefore think that there is an idealization at work in any reading that imagines autotheory’s construction of a plural self as successfully securing a just ethico-political relation since such a reading strategically forgets (as all idealizations must) the persistent injustices and inequalities that accompany the lived experience of relationality. Indeed, something of this problem becomes visible if I shift the language I have

employed to describe Nelson's project from the loosely psychoanalytic idiom of the "incorporation of others" to the more politically damning vernacular of the "assimilation of others." What this five-syllable substitution effects is a palpable value change, wherein the presumed neutrality of the act of taking an other in (with the implicit suggestion that the other is not being somehow reduced or redacted for one's own self-justification) dissolves, rendering into the heavily criticized practice of transforming otherness into more of the (dominant) self-same. No matter how motivated it might be by an aspirational desire to dispossess the self through the other, the plural self necessarily convokes the other in the service of a self-composition, and therefore is always in danger of enacting a self-expansion at the very moment it would be most committed to a dispossession. While a plural self may intend to multiply and diversify the singularity of the self in an aspiration toward relational solidarity, the final effect of such a composition is, importantly, not secured by this intention alone.

My point here is thus that if the plural self is to be a useful mode for contemporary autotheory to reimagine selfhood through frameworks other than the split subject familiar to much psychoanalytic and critical theory, then its best use is in how it announces the relational fault lines of self-composition without a claim to being able to resolve or redress them. Put another way, the suturing in of others' narratives characteristic of Nelson's work (and the work of similar writers like Sedgwick or Kraus) pronounces, but does not resolve, longstanding ethico-political questions attendant on all projects of self-narration, which in their very gesture toward a horizon of relational solidarity run the risk of usurping the voice of the other in the service of better securing one's own name. What this recognition allows for, then, is the positioning of contemporary autotheory's move to a pluralization of the self as just one possible iteration of autotheory, animated by a deeply sympathetic present-tense desire to recuperate a version of the

self answerable on principally ethical and political grounds—but not, for all that good intention, unequivocally just. If the autotheoretical plural self aspires to a relationally-oriented form of solidarity that deliberately departs from past critiques of the conscious, cohesive self, then this self might best, I suggest, speak—but speak without answering.

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<AUBIO>

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Notes

¹ Throughout this article, I most often speak in terms of “autobiography” (rather than “memoir”) since autobiography is typically understood as the broader category of writing within which memoir is one subset. While autobiography claims some authority in accurately representing the whole of a life, memoir narrows its focus to key events or experiences, often forgoing claims to both the formal *bildungsroman* organization characteristic of autobiography and to absolute realism. According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narratives*, memoir “refers generally to life-writing that takes a segment of a life, not its entirety, . . . focusing on interconnected experiences” (274).

² In one of the few available academic articles on autotheory as an emergent genre, Lauren Fournier contextualizes it within the history of post-1960s feminist theory and art practice specifically, placing it within “a well-established feminist genealogy” (645). According to Fournier, “‘Autotheory’ has emerged as a term to describe the practices of engaging with theory, life, and art from the perspective of one’s lived experiences; an emergent term, it is very much in the zeitgeist of contemporary feminist and queer feminist cultural production today” (643). While recognizing its critical lineage, Fournier nevertheless treats autotheory as “a different way of doing theory,” a “renewed aesthetic practice” that has germinated in postinternet and transmedial spaces as an alternative resource within “posttheory” and “antitheory” climate increasingly hostile to the discourse of, and demands made by, humanistic inquiry more broadly (645). Although I agree that autotheory has a strong feminist genealogy, it is not the only one, and I am ultimately skeptical of claims about its novelty.

³ Although Freud’s letters to Fleiss suggest that his self-analysis did not begin until 1895, Freud’s interest in dreams extends back to 1894, during his treatment of Frau Emmy von N.

⁴ As James Strachey notes in his introduction to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the publication of the Freud/Fleiss correspondence allows for the creation of fairly detailed biographical timeline (xii-xiv). For further biographical accounts, see Didier Anzieu and chapter 3 of Peter Gay.

⁵ Freud mourned the loss of his father unconsciously by writing *The Interpretation of Dreams*, only making the link between the two events a decade later in the 1909 preface to the second edition. Writes Freud: “this book has a further subjective significance for me personally. . . It was, I found, a portion of my own self-analysis, my reaction to my father’s death” (xxvi).

⁶ Freud also continually revised his 1905 *Three Essays on a Theory of Sexuality*, which has a similar palimpsest quality, especially in the footnotes.

⁷ See, for instance, Roy Schafer, Peter L. Rudnytsky and Rita Charon, Meg Harris Williams, and Arabella Kurtz. This framing of the therapeutic aspects of narrative recuperation can likewise be seen in cultural studies appropriations of psychoanalysis from literary theory to trauma studies, including Steven Marcus, Peter Brooks, Donald Polkinghorne, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, and Cathy Caruth.

⁸ Although Freud's work on hysteria with Breuer and patients like Anna O. and Emmy von N. was pivotal in his move away from the hypnotic method, he only fully solidified the free associative method as a way of charting the latent content of his own dreams in his self-analysis. Laplanche and Pontalis note that "no precise date can be given as that of its discovery, for it was developed gradually, between 1892 and 1898" but that "Freud was making use of the technique of free association in his self-analysis—especially in the analysis of his dreams" (169).

⁹ Nelson's assignation of "autotheory" to Preciado raises interesting questions about the genre's origins and, consequently, of how to define or circumscribe its specific genre characteristics. Although Preciado does use the term "autotheory" in his work—more frequently in the Spanish language version than in the English edition, which often translates autotheory as "self-theory"—Preciado's careening, theory-soaked autoethnography has very different methods and aims when it comes to chronicling selfhood than Nelson's more performative, pluralized literary experiment. While Preciado uses his own body to phenomenologically theorize what he describes as a regime of pharmacopornographic regulation, thereby using his self as a kind of case-study, Nelson in contrast performatively incorporates theory into the literary plural self she

constructs in her writing, deploying it as a layered expansion of her experience of pregnancy and of Harry's gender transition. What these differences allow for, consequently, is for autotheory to function not so much as a rigidly defined genre, but as a provocation, a conceptual space for reimagining the possibilities for self-writing, past and present.

¹⁰ Indeed, *The Argonauts* began as a set of lectures in Sedgwick's name, making the filiation all the plainer. Moreover, both texts—Nelson's and Sedgwick's—pay homage to Roland Barthes's *A Lovers' Discourse: Fragments*, which orders its philosophical-qua-autobiographical "fragments" through alphabetized key terms that, together, form an address to love itself. While Sedgwick echoes Barthes' title, Nelson employs his distinctive style of suspending proper names in the margins. With such forms of indirect citation, Sedgwick's and Nelson's texts both call attention to the constitutive function of relationality, which in different ways becomes the focus of each.