

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR

Autotheory as a Literary Practice

Ghent University, Belgium | 17 September 2026

*Venue: Rustpunt, Ghent***FIRST SESSION: THE BODY: WRITING MOTHERHOOD, WRITING ILLNESS**

Kim Schoof (VU), 'Literary Experimentation in Recent Dutch-language Autotheory on Childbirth'

An explicitly literary rather than a para-academic work of autotheory, *De stem van Sulina* ('Sulina's Voice') (2024) by the Flemish author Anneleen van Offel recounts/theorizes the author's experiences of pregnancy, childbirth and young parenthood. It articulates these experiences in a chronological account of the journey that the first-person narrator and her partner make along the Danube to Sulina, the river's zero point, whilst reflecting on them in reference to both Western and Eastern European knowledges as developed historically on the locations visited by the couple. Being experimental in setup, the text may also be said to theorize *in a literary way* the experience of selfloss as prepared during pregnancy and endured in childbirth, arguably impossible to capture in straightforward theoretical discourse.

This presentation reflects on the notion of 'theory' in 'autotheory', considering whether references to knowledges can be said to be only one literary mode of theorizing the self among many others. It does so 'laying bare' ('laying bare' tellingly being the original meaning of the Dutch word for giving birth, 'baren') various literary ways in which *De stem van Sulina* may be said to theorize selfloss in childbirth, analyzing not only its references to Western and Eastern European knowledges, but also the waterway-related imagery it introduces and some other experimental stylistic choices. It does so comparing these stylistic choices to those in two other examples of recent Dutch-language experimental birth literature that do not include many references to knowledges but equally articulate experiences of selfloss, i.e. the autobiographical novel *Oersoep* ('Primordial Soup') (2023) by Bregje Hofstede and the autobiographical poem 'Een fjord van pijn' ('A Fjord of Pain') (2023) by Laurine Verweijen. While these three texts share waterway-related imagery, the described birth experiences differ, as do the precise experimental literary ways in which they are articulated.

Kim Schoof (she, 1992) is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam. Her recently completed PhD project reconceptualizes relationality and

liberation in both experimental and widely read contemporary autobiographical literature by authors such as Maggie Nelson and Édouard Louis. Apart from publishing in the academic context, she writes literary essays and book reviews for Dutch-language magazines and weeklies such as *De Groene Amsterdammer*, *De Witte Raaf* and *Hollands Maandblad*. She is an editor at literary magazine *De Gids*.

Dagmar Vandebosch (KU Leuven), 'Autotheory and (Non-)Motherhood in María Fernanda Ampuero's *Visceral*'

Maternity is a recurring theme in contemporary autotheoretical works, many of which focus on “matrescence”, a term coined by anthropologist Dana Raphael to refer to the process of physical, psychological, emotional and social changes related to becoming a (biological) mother. Following up on Mercedes Bogino Larrambeberé's call to rethink hegemonic motherhood, this proposal examines very different aspects and experiences related to motherhood in *Visceral*, a collection of generically hybrid short texts by the Ecuadoran writer María Fernanda Ampuero. Motherhood is addressed in this book from two different and equally painful autobiographical angles: on the one hand, a daughter's perspective on intergenerational trauma; on the other hand, the frustration of unrealised motherhood.

Although it would be highly arguable to label this work as primarily or even substantially autotheoretical, it does echo with Lauren Fournier's description of autotheory as “the integration of the *auto* or the ‘self’ with philosophy or theory, often in ways that are direct, performative, or self-aware” (2022: 6), and more so with her methodological approach “grounded in the personal-theoretical, gut-centered nature of autotheoretical research” (2022: 5). As the title of the book indicates, Ampuero's writing offers a strongly embodied reflection on Latin America's social and cultural reality, both from a feminist and decolonial perspective. In this paper, I aim to explore the potential of autotheory as an analytical tool or lens for the interpretation of literary writing at the interface between autobiography, autofiction and the essay. More particularly, I will examine in what ways and to what effect Ampuero recurs to theory and how autotheory interacts with the role of autobiography and autofiction.

Bibliography

Ampuero, María Fernanda. *Visceral*. Madrid: Páginas de Espuma, 2024.

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Fournier, Lauren. *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. Cambridge (Mss) / London: The MIT Press, 2022.

Dagmar Vandebosch is Professor of Hispanic literatures at KU Leuven. Her scientific interests focus on the construction of (trans)national cultural identities in Spanish-language narrative prose and essays and on Hispanic literature in intercultural contexts. She has studied literature and documentary film in contexts of exile, migration, travel and tourism. She is currently developing a research line concerning 'odd' family relations in Hispanic culture. Dagmar Vandebosch is the author of the book *Y no con el lenguaje preciso de la ciencia. La ensayística de Gregorio Marañón en la entreguerra española* (Droz, 2006), and co-editor of several books on Hispanic Literatures.

Zoë Mendelson (Glasgow School of Art), 'Fever Dream: Writing through Ill-Being and Medical Fictioning'

This paper connects strands of critical theory and medical narrativising within which lived experience accompanies a form of 'medical fictioning'. The fiction I am referring to is not a story written from within illness - which is an established form of practice from Helen Keller to Audre Lorde to Ann Boyer - but a new space I am opening up to claim that ill-being is already fictive, made so through bio-power, medical encounters and cultural interpretations of the crip body.

I am writing this paper to create space for this new terminology and to attach illness in the cultural imagination to potential clinical insights. Contentiously, I am interested in critiquing assumptions of bio-agency that have emerged from autotheory's spotlighting of vulnerability, and pointing to a viable fictive self that is, instead, constructed via the public imagination, misdiagnoses, medical power structures and patient/physician dynamics.

I am interested in disability as method (coined by Rebecca Sanchez in 'Crip Authorship') and contemporising Susan Sontag's work on illness as metaphor. I am flagging how we inhabit and live with embodied cultural fictions, literary selves, the spectacularising of disorder/illness and appropriations of disease. These can be seen to parallel or co-exist with the clinical - so for patients or users of healthcare systems there may be an encounter with a version of themselves produced by culture - a medical fictioning that walks alongside ill-being and affects treatment. My paper asks whether inhabiting these fictions becomes an embodied and embedded part of illness/disability itself, and then asks, how can we write from within this, powerfully?

I ask whether moving away from self-examination as a form of agency towards a critical methodology from within the disabled body allows us to consciously inhabit fictive

selves, formed by the architectures, power structures and appropriations of medicine/culture and thus requiring a critical détournement.

Dr **Zoë Mendelson** (b. 1976) is an artist and writer based in Glasgow, Scotland. She is Head of Painting & Printmaking at the Glasgow School of Art. Zoë Mendelson's work includes various forms of writing (fiction and non-fiction), painting, collage, drawing, hand-driven animation, installation, and singing. She has exhibited widely showing works, performing and publishing, nationally and internationally. Venues have included Fondation Cartier, Paris, Chapter Cardiff, CRAC, Alsace, Barbican Centre, London, Kunstmuseum Olten, Switzerland and Science Museum London, among others. Zoë's work is also installed permanently (visibly and covertly) in public buildings. An archive of works can be viewed at www.zoemendelson.co.uk

Zoë's research engages disorder as a culturally produced phenomenon, in parallel to its clinical counterpart, suggesting its value to knowledge production within Fine Art and critical theory. Her practice-based PhD (Central St Martins, 2015) examined hoarding in relation to collection via collagist methodologies. This research located and spatialised systematised archiving and collecting alongside seemingly pathological object relations, and included relationships drawn between urban space and wellness. Zoë is interested in how culture co-opts psychological and medical motifs and spectacularises them, leading to complex and widespread mis-readings. This has led her to produce artworks in direct response to imagery produced or used within medicine itself - particularly in diagnostics. She has a profound interest in ill-being as a place of potential agency and advocacy - at odds with a current focus on well-being as a 'success' narrative.

In relation to the proposal for this event, Zoë has engaged with medical knowledges within visual and literary contexts previously: In 2017, she hosted and curated a one-day event in Artsadmin's 250-seat theatre in East London, titled 'Spectacular Evidence, Theatres of the Observed Mind'. It included presentations, performances, screenings and talks from the fields of visual art, medicine and critical theory. Drawing upon histories of madness and its exhibition, and considering how it has been staged as cultural performance, this event considered behaviours and 'performances' exchanged between viewer and physician in relation to patient.

In 2022 Zoë Mendelson presented a paper for *Confabulations* (a new series of urgent conversations on health, medicine, and medicalised bodies at University of Durham; Queens University, Canada; University of Lincoln) that examined the Covid-19 virus as metaphor, considering applied uses for an examination of its spread, mutation and its ambitions. Drawing on expanded field practice and the medical, this research used

models from art practice to reconsider the site of the pandemic home and body as host, referring to Susan Sontag's 'Illness as Metaphor' (1978), Mary Douglas' 'Purity and Danger' (1966) and Paul B Preciado's writing about Covid-19 in 2020. This has been adapted as a book chapter and will be published this summer (2026) in 'On Emergence: Practices of art and education as they re-form' pub. PNG - the Parallax Network Group, U-Jazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, Poland.

In 2015 Zoë Mendelson was a selected member of the AHRC/Wellcome Trust funded New Generations programme for researchers in the Medical Humanities at the University of Durham. Zoë co-curated the network paintingresearch with Geraint Evans (2015 - 2022) and is co-founder and editor of The Edit (www.theedit.site), an online and inclusive, de-canonised bibliography for students in Fine Art and related fields, now used in Arts education internationally.

SECOND SESSION: BEYOND THE ANGLOPHONE

Alex Brostoff (Georgetown University), 'The Autotheory Effect'

To date, accounts of autotheory have been largely focused on the Global North, obscuring genealogies that not only unsettle understandings of what autotheory is, but more significantly, what it does. Drawing on my forthcoming monograph, *The Autotheory Effect: Hemispheric Encounters with the Grammar of Relation* (Columbia University Press, 2027), this talk reframes autotheory's place in the political history of trans and queer literature of the Américas. Rather than read autotheory as a unitary category that renders global practices intelligible as such, my study constellates transnational and multilingual forms that precede and exceed the term. It shifts the geopolitical focus from Euro-American epistemes to hemispheric frames of reference, examining minoritarian modes that fabulate and interrogate the subject produced by legacies of colonial violence, slavery, and cisheteropatriarchy. Autotheory, it argues, is not new; novelty is but an effect of the neologism. Comparing divergent genealogies that reflect the past half century of poststructuralist thought as it interfaces with travesti-trans epistemologies, queer of color feminisms, and decolonial critique, *The Autotheory Effect* stages critical encounters between the materiality of embodiment and the mediation of language. Chapters cross generic and geopolitical borders, building on hemispheric debates about how the colonality of gender constitutes the subject in "theory," while conjoining flesh, figuration, and politics in work by authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Camila Sosa Villada, and Cristina Rivera Garza. This approach relocates and rehistoricizes autotheory with a focus on the politics of translatability across the hemispheric Américas. An interrogation

of the structures of knowledge production maintained by the coloniality of gender, *The Autotheory Effect* queers the relation between the conditions that produce a writing subject and the collective function of that writing. As cultures of argument shift toward forms that fuse academic inquiry with literary praxis, *The Autotheory Effect* illustrates how intertextual relations renew transnational structures of solidarity from the hemispheric margins.

Alex Brostoff is Assistant Professor of English and Women's and Gender Studies at Georgetown University, where they are affiliated faculty in Global and Comparative Literature and the Center for Latin American Studies. An interdisciplinary scholar and translator, they study how trans and queer cultural production negotiates the relationship between self-figuration and decolonial critique. Their first book, *The Autotheory Effect: Hemispheric Encounters with the Grammar of Relation*, is forthcoming with Columbia University Press. They are co-editor of two volumes: *Autotheories* (The MIT Press, 2025) and *Reassignments: Trans and Sex from the Clinical to the Critical* (Fordham University Press, forthcoming 2027); they have guest edited special issues of *ASAP/Journal* on *autotheory* (2021) and *College Literature* on *trans literatures* (2025). Brostoff has also translated a range of critical theory and literary nonfiction from Spanish and Portuguese, including Indigenous leader Ailton Krenak's *Ancestral Future* (Polity, 2024) and Brazilian activist Antônio Bispo dos Santos's *The Earth Gives, the Earth Wants* (Polity, 2026). Their scholarship and translations have appeared in *Diacritics*, *Representations*, *TSQ*, *Critical Times*, and *South Atlantic Quarterly*, as well as at the Museum of Modern Art and elsewhere.

Helena Van Praet (UGent – FWO), 'Whose Autotheories? A Model for an Appreciation and Extension of Autotheory from a Literary Perspective'

While autotheory is often considered a literary undertaking, the term usually calls to mind works of critical discourse and activist scholarship, like Christina Sharpe's seminal *In the Wake*. What seems to be missing, however, is an account of how such critical writings on the one hand, and works that lean more towards novelistic writing or poetry on the other, like Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, can be considered together as distinct instantiations of autotheory. This paper therefore seeks to present a preliminary model of autotheoretical writings on a spectrum ranging from critical (counter)discourse to experimental fiction. To this end, it draws on insights from autobiography and genre studies, including analyses by Philippe Gasparini, and builds on Werner Wolf's prototypical approach to genres via the concept of a mode. Conceiving of autotheory as an interaction between lyric,

essayistic, and narrative modes, this paper then elaborates on this proposed model in an analysis of two autotheoretical works, one written in Dutch and the other in English: *Tekenen van het universum* (*Signs of the Universe*, my trans.) by Dutch writer Emy Koopman and Chris Kraus's cult classic *I Love Dick*. While both works deal with similar concerns of female self-abasement following romantic rejection, the analysis shows that they occupy different positions vis-à-vis referentiality and fictionality, which is reflected in their reliance on essayistic, narrative, and lyric elements. This differentiation, this paper argues, is worth attending to as it is revealing in terms of the liberties taken (both legal and literary, for example when it comes to narration), the subject's (collective) identity, and the relation between the represented and extratextual world. The proposed model is hence a first, exploratory attempt at mapping and interpreting this rich body of contemporary autotheoretical writings from a perspective that is deliberately literary and not exclusively anglophone.

Helena Van Praet is an FWO Junior Postdoctoral Fellow in Dutch and Comparative Literature at Ghent University. Her current project studies an autotheoretical impulse in contemporary Dutch-language literature in dialogue with North American works of autotheory. She is the author of *Feeling-Thinking or Embodied Cognition in the Poetry of Rozalie Hirs and Anne Carson* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2026) and co-editor of *Anne Carson and the Unknown: Contemporary Perspectives on Poetic Experimentation* (forthcoming with University of Michigan Press).

THIRD SESSION: INQUIRIES INTO (MATERIAL) FORM

Tessel Veneboer (LUCA School of Arts – KU Leuven), 'Pseudo-autobiography and the Politics of Form in Kathy Acker's Early Work'

In the early 1970s, Kathy Acker published serial novels pseudonymously under the name of the Black Tarantula. These episodic works were collages of commercial pornographic books, formal logic, and diary materials and were circulated through mailing lists in the New York City art world. Drawing on Acker's notebooks from the early 1970s, this paper traces how Acker constructs her pseudo-autobiographical "I" through techniques of (self)-plagiarism, overlap, and logical contradiction, and argues that her characteristic absurdist treatment of causality (if x, then y) is deeply indebted to her study of formal logic and the philosophy of mathematics. Acquired by New York University in 2019 and only recently made publicly accessible, these notebooks have yet to receive sustained scholarly attention.

I will argue that Acker's experiments with plagiarism resist a straightforward feminist politicization of the autobiographical genre by layering incompatible texts and voices to produce a form of non-actuality—a writing that simulates knowledge without claiming empirical authority. In doing so, Acker's "fake autobiography" problematizes feminist autobiography: her texts do not aim for better or more truthful representations by relying on lived experience, but foreground subjectivity and sexuality as formal problems. The paper ultimately posits contradiction as a constitutive mode of affective and political intelligibility, situating Acker's work alongside feminist theories of contradiction and ambivalence while reframing Acker's autotheory as a literary practice grounded in formal composition rather than voice or narration.

This paper thus presents Acker as an important precursor to autotheory, as her influence on writers like Maggie Nelson and Paul B. Preciado also testifies, but locates Acker's feminist politics specifically in her formal experimentation.

Tessel Veneboer is a lecturer in film studies and literature at LUCA School of Arts in Brussels. Her research focuses on experimental writing by women, formalism, and the feminist pornography debates. She holds a PhD in English from Ghent University, which she obtained in 2025. Together with Hannah van Hove, she is co-editor of *Ambivalent Lyrical Subjects: Representation and Literary Experiment in the United States (1970–2000)*, forthcoming with Bloomsbury Publishing US. She is currently revising her dissertation, *Kathy Acker, Pornography as Crisis of Form*, for publication and developing a new research project on the sexological concept of inversion and literary form in early twentieth-century British women's writing. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Journal of Lesbian Studies*, *Boundary 2 Review*, *New Formations*, *The Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings*, and *Textual Practice*. She has held an FWO Fundamental Research Doctoral Fellowship and received the Mary Lily Research Grant for archival research at Duke University's Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture.

Laura Haynes (Glasgow School of Art): 'Autotheory in the Archive: Tillie Olsen's Collective Memoir as Literary Counter-History'

Tillie Olsen (1912–2007), an American writer, activist and critic, wrote across prolonged, embodied interruption. *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, her only novel, was begun in the 1930s and published unfinished in 1974; her short stories, mostly autofictive and collected in *Tell Me a Riddle* were written intermittently and published in 1961; and

Silences, a seminal work of essay and archive, appeared in 1978, during an institutionalisation of feminist criticism, the expansion of the postwar academy and renewed debates about women's labour, care and authorship. Writing as a working-class, second-generation immigrant mother whose literary career was structurally discontinuous, Olsen developed a literary practice grounded in relational authority and in which theory is produced through literary form.

This paper positions Olsen's work as an early instance of autotheory as a literary mode. Across critical prose and fiction, Olsen developed a distinct narratology of endurance. Narrative time as non-teleological and characterised by suspension, recursion and delay, as oriented toward maintenance and care rather than event or resolution. *Silences*, as a work of collective memoir and counter-historiography, is organised through paratext and annotation as literary devices where quotation, biographical vignette, unfinished manuscript and autobiographical fragment operate as narrative traces within an intertextual assemblage. Here the autotheoretical is intermittent and decentred: the 'I' appears in relay, producing a choral voice structured by citation and montage where authorship is performed collectively rather than individuated. Theory is generated through form, through arrangement, juxtaposition and accumulation rather than discursive exposition. *Tell Me a Riddle* stages an adjacent autotheoretical form where instances of reportage and fictioning examine maternal ambivalence, withdrawal, protest and refusal.

Incompletion, interruption and silence are constitutive formal conditions and Olsen's work challenges dominant literary values of continuity and productivity. Read as autotheory, her writing expands the field's literary genealogy and foregrounds collective memoir, annotation and narrative unfinishedness as central techniques through which literature thinks about authorship, labour, historical visibility and the institutional conditions under which knowledge is produced.

Dr **Laura Haynes** is a writer, editor and academic based in Glasgow. She was co-director of *MAP* magazine (2011 – 2024) and at The Glasgow School of Art is leader of the studio-based interdisciplinary Master of Letters Art Writing postgraduate programme, where she also edits *The Yellow Paper: Journal for Art Writing*.

Laura's writing and research is concerned with autotheory and biomythography as poetics for critique. Publishing internationally, and across various forms, her work is published in journals including *MuseMedusa: Revue de Littérature et D'Art Modernes* (Review of Modern Literature and Art, University of Montreal), *Journal for Writing in Creative Practice* (Intellect) and magazines and presses including *Sternberg Press*,

Freelands Foundation, *Nothing Personal* and *MAP*. With Prof. Susannah Thompson, she was co-editor of 'Art Writing, Paraliterature and Intrepid Forms of Practice', a special issue of the *Journal for Writing in Creative Practice*. She is currently working on her first novel, *The Quick* and a co-edited anthology for *Sternberg Press Tomorrow's Art School* series.

Beth Casserly (KU Leuven), 'Mind the Gap: Text, Image, and Narratorial Control in Graphic Autotheory'

Comics studies broadly observes that the co-existence of text and image forms communicative and interpretive gaps, represented visually on the page at varying levels of signification. While text and image can work together to communicate a "fuller" story, something is always lost in their gaps. Barbara Postema has illustrated how such gaps can signify or leave room for reader interpretation. Autotheoretical writing necessitates a similar practice of gap-formation between selves as a literary mode that blends critical reflection with autobiographical narration. Carolyn Laubender, Annamarie Jagose, and Lee Wallace have explored how the singular "I" is destabilised by autotheory, as both outside voices and multiple inner selves are vital to autotheoretical narration. Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* contains many layers of the represented self—writer, narrator, written character(s), and drawn character(s)—and situates itself within the dual traditions of autotheory and comics.

Bechdel uses the graphic form to visualise the opening or closure of gaps, overlaying analytical narration, arrows, and labels that interpret depicted events through psychoanalytic frameworks. In this process, theorising the self becomes a narrative dictation of events: the narrating Alison becomes focaliser and analyst, directing the reader's interpretation of her past selves. These strategies often minimise the interpretive gaps central to comics reading, replacing reader inference with immediate theoretical explanation.

Gaps may be closed and the narrator's interpretation reign, or they may open, allowing multiple voices and selves to become visible and inviting the reader into the interpretive work of narrativising the subject. Interpretation grants the autotheoretical narrator authority over autobiographical meaning, foregrounding narratological questions of focalisation and voice. This paper thus demonstrates how graphic autotheory uniquely stages tension between self-analysis and the irreducible gaps between the selves it seeks to theorise.

Beth Casserly is a Master's graduate from the department of Western Literature at KU Leuven. Their current research focuses on autotheory and psychoanalysis, with a particular emphasis on graphic autotheory. Their broader research interests include hydrofeminism, queer embodiment, and diaspora studies.

FOURTH SESSION: AUTOTHEORY AND THE NEOLIBERAL ECONOMY

Luisa Wan (University of Cambridge), 'Putting "I" on the page: Complicity as an Autotheoretical Style in Cathy Park Hong's *Minor Feelings* (2020)'

In *Minor Feelings: A Reckoning on Race and the Asian Condition* (2020), Cathy Park Hong questions, 'Will there be a future where I, on the page, am simply I, on the page, and not I, proxy for a whole ethnicity, imploring you to believe we are human beings who feel pain?'.¹ At the heart of this poignant reflection on the racialized 'I' is the issue of literary representation, or in Hong's words, the epistemological stakes of putting the self 'on the page' which animates the field of autotheory. In Hong's struggle to establish an 'I' whose humanity is always already under contest, the literary site of the personal essay frames her autotheoretical approach as a necessarily complicitous performance of selfhood that is nevertheless oriented towards the rehabilitation of the collective 'we'. Deemed as the genre of liberal individualism par excellence, the personal essay dramatizes Hong's internalization of the individualistic impulse that threatens to collapse her with her identities. Through her conscious engagement with the genre, Hong resists an individualized representation of the self that, as she puts it, leads 'ethnicity to be siloed'.² Using the lens of performativity to understand Hong's seemingly self-negating approach, this paper traces the experimental ways in which she evokes the literary tropes of racial trauma to reconfigure them into grounds for critical reimagination. Read first and foremost as a textual performance, Hong's purposeful representation of racialized personhood crucially differentiates autotheory as a literary method to draw attention to the stylistic ways in which the self is made to be complicit with liberal individualism. More broadly, by approaching the epistemological stakes of autotheory as an inherently literary dilemma of representation, this paper suggests that it is autotheory's capacity to perform those discriminatory mechanisms that constitutes its very style of critical intervention.

¹ Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: A Reckoning on Race and the Asian Condition* (Profile Books, 2020), p. 49.

² Ibid., p. 104.

Luisa Wan is a PhD student in the Faculty of English at the University of Cambridge. Her thesis studies the contemporary personal essay as a genre that is critically committed to expanding the collective possibilities within the frameworks of humanism and individualism. Before starting her PhD, she was a teaching assistant at the University of Hong Kong, where she also completed a BA and an MPhil on postcolonial personal essays. Her research is largely devoted to the politics of solidarity and representation in contemporary literature and criticism.

Vilashini Cooppan (University of California at Santa Cruz), 'Autotheory and Love in the Age of Neoliberal Capitalism'

Fredric Jameson has quipped that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. The much-diagnosed “end” of sex in Gen Z adds another easy target, with the added twist of having emerged in an era when love and capitalism are entwined as never before. Eva Ilouz’s “cold intimacy” describes the condition of love lived in relation to, even made synonymous with, the contemporary regime of capitalism. Love in this mode consolidates a neoliberal subject whose individuality is expressed in choice, who relates to others as fungible goods on a constant market, and whose desires seek extraction, completion, exhaustion. Ilouz’s Marxist sociological analysis has been further honed by the philosopher Byung Hung Chul’s *The Agony of Eros*, among others exploring the terrain of love, desire, and sex. The latter are autotheory’s native ground, as evidenced by works like Audre Lorde’s “The Uses of the Erotic,” Chris Kraus’s *I Love Dick*, Paul Preciado’s *Testo Junkie*, bell hooks’s *All About Love*, Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, Joanna Walsh’s *Breakup*, and many more. How does autotheory’s rendering of love and desire offer a different perspective of love’s neoliberalism? And how does a specifically literary register of critical theory offer alternative imaginaries to those so often presented as our collective fate?

Vilashini Cooppan is Professor of Literature and affiliated faculty in Critical Race and Ethnic Studies and History of Art and Visual Culture at the University of California at Santa Cruz. She is the author of *Worlds Within: National Narratives and Global Connections in Postcolonial Writing* (Stanford UP, 2009) as well as numerous articles and essays on comparative and world literature, postcolonial studies, memory studies, affect theory, and genre theory. Her work on autotheory and biofiction has appeared in *Qui Parle*, *Critical Times*, *ASAP/Journal* and *The Routledge Companion to Biofiction* (Routledge, 2024) and *Creative/Critical Ancestors* (Cambridge University Press, 2026). She coedited, with Alex Brostoff, *Autotheories* (The MIT Press, 2025).

Liza Mattutat (Leuphana University Lüneburg), ‘Writing Intimacy: Autotheory and the Aesthetics of Immediacy’

In her 2024 monograph *Immediacy, or The Style of Too-Late Capitalism*, Anna Kornbluh offered a harsh critique of autotheory. According to Kornbluh, it is part of a broader and highly problematic cultural trend: the rise of ‘immediacy style’. This style is evident in the growing popularity of immersive art exhibitions and biopics in cinema, as well as in the increasing use of first-person narration in novels and the rise of autobiographical, autofictional and autotheoretical writing. Kornbluh argues, that these phenomena have one thing in common: they “immanentize[...] presence, eclipse[...] relay, and [above all] negate [...] mediation”. In autotheory this negation of mediation supposedly manifests as an aversion to fiction and abstraction, prioritizing instead the author’s immediate, unaltered experience. Since creating distance through mediation is a prerequisite of critique, such writing, Kornbluh argues, cannot challenge the status quo. Rather, it immerses us in and binds us to the catastrophic present of “too-late capitalism”. According to Kornbluh, therefore, autotheory is “antitheory”, ideology.

In my presentation, I argue that Kornbluh underestimates the literary practice of autotheory, which has its own textual and performative strategies. More specifically, she conflates *immediacy as such* with deliberately produced *effects of immediacy*. Through an ‘autobiographical pact’ (Lejeune), auto-theory fosters intimacy between reader and text. However, this intimacy is not immediate; rather it is carefully constructed through techniques such as addressing the reader directly, blurring the boundary between author and narrator, and including supposedly unaltered life documents (e.g. chats, letters, and diaries). Drawing on my own autotheoretical practice and Kathy Acker’s reflections on the performativity of first-person narration, I will analyze some of these textual strategies that foster intimacy. My aim is to both refute Kornbluh’s critique and contribute to an understanding of the specific nature of autotheory as a literary practice.

Liza Mattutat is a philosopher and writer specializing in feminist perspectives on law and social reproduction. From 2016 to 2026, she was a researcher and lecturer at Leuphana University Lüneburg, Germany, most recently as a postdoctoral researcher in the DFG-funded Research Training Group “Cultures of Critique.” Starting in 2027, she will investigate the material dimensions of feminist utopias, the histories of their emergence, and their social and political effects in the research project *Utopia(n) Matters*, which has been approved for funding by the Volkswagen Foundation.