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Auto-thanato-theory: Dark Narcissistic Care for the Self in Sedgwick and Zambreno

THIS ESSAY ADVANCES WHAT I CALL “AUTO-THANATO-THEORY,” which I draw from certain aspects of autotheory.¹ I am particularly interested in two texts that look toward death, namely Eve Sedgwick’s *A Dialogue on Love* (1999) and Kate Zambreno’s *Appendix Project* (2019). Even though Sedgwick’s text predates the announcement of the term “autotheory” in the contemporary theoretical scene, and Zambreno’s text has yet to be embraced as autotheory, they can nonetheless be considered to be part of the genre’s growing archive. This is because, if we take autotheory to be a genre-fluid mode of writing where a self—in all its history, biography, and psychology—intercalates itself explicitly within a theoretical reflection on a contemporary being-in-the-world, *A Dialogue on Love* and *Appendix Project* share these features.² But at stake in *A Dialogue on Love* and *Appendix Project* is a self that desires to be done with existence, if not a self that feels already dead. Such a disposition seemingly goes against the optimistic horizon, or even celebratory intention, of foregrounding the self in autotheory, the aim of which is arguably to give its critique of being-in-the-world a more complex, affective, and perhaps authentic layer, rather than leaving critique at the level of theoretical deftness or rhetorical ruse. And yet, if a self that looks toward death or feels itself already dead finds a discursive space today, I would say that such a space was opened up by autotheory, precisely through its narcissistic dimension, one which arguably gets us to rethink narcissism as a “care for the self” in the Foucauldian sense.³

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As I hope to make clear, there is an important reckoning to be made in the discussion of autotheory with respect to the self that desires its departure from the world.

AUTOTHEORY, OR FROM NARCISSISM
TO A CARE FOR THE SELF

Let me first elaborate on the narcissistic dimension in autotheory by turning to two seemingly foundational texts: Maggie Nelson's *Argonauts* (2015), in which the term autotheory first entered into contemporary theoretical discourse, and Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie* (first published in Spanish in 2008 and translated into English in 2013), in which the opening proclamation as "self theory" serves as inspiration for Nelson's own work (11). These autotheory texts make the self an extensive foreground, and they do so by giving equal, if not greater, exposition of the self's experiential engagements and affective responses in their respective theoretical critique of a contemporary being-in-the-world. They also inscribe, explicitly at the outset, the self's queer sexual desires and activities: *The Argonauts* opens with anal sex between the narrating/theorizing self and the transgender lover while *Testo Junkie* offers the theorizing/transgender narrator filming himself masturbating while addressing his dead lover. In both scenes, a certain narcissism is depicted. Nelson acknowledges as much through both her allegiance to Eileen Myles, who has disclosed the "dirty secret" that everything she writes is about herself, and her declaration that all she negotiates while being in a queer relationship and raising a child with her transgender partner are nothing short of "the personal made public" (60). Nelson qualifies this narcissism as distinct from the narcissistic performance that is the "instantaneous, noncalibrated, digital self-revelation" afforded by contemporary social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, which Nelson finds alienating (60–61). Her narcissism, she claims, is more deliberative, ethical even, which furthermore has an ontological basis: it exhibits itself as "writing that dramatizes the ways in which we are *for another* or *by virtue of another*, not in a single instance, but from the start and always" (60). This is a kind of ethico-political narcissism in the sense of actualizing a veritable queer theory, advanced by a "self-involved thinking," that, in Nelson's view, reaffirms Eve Sedgwick's dictum that the use of the first-person pronoun serves to disseminate and affirm queer subjectivities (41).

As Nelson notes, “Sedgwick once proposed that ‘what it takes—all it takes—to make the description “queer” a true one is the impulsion to use it in the first person” (29).

The ethico-political dimension of narcissism can be found in *Testo Junkie* too. The theoretical commitment of the book is to present a largely Foucauldian critique of what Preciado calls the “pharmacopornographic” complex that has been producing, determining, and controlling heteronormative subjectivities via drugs and pornography since the twentieth century (36). As Preciado sees it, “the goal of contemporary critical theory would be to unravel our condition as pharmacopornographic workers/consumers”; however, the problem, is that “the philosophers of biopolitics prefer not to reveal their position as customers of the global pharmacopornomarket” (49). In order to rectify this lack or refusal of disclosure, Preciado presents the masturbating scene at the beginning of *Testo Junkie*, complete with video camera, testosterone gel, lubricant, and dildos, thereby acknowledging his status as a consumer in the pharmacopornographic market. This is where the insertion of an apparently narcissistic self into a theoretical text also lends greater authenticity to critique by recognizing how the theorizing self can be equally implicated in the very object of critique. Later in *Testo Junkie*, Preciado discloses his involvement in drag king circuits, where he operates no doubt as some form of the market’s “worker” this time,⁴ providing explicit details of what goes on behind the scenes. It is in his experimentations with drag king performativities that he gathers the “collective experience of the arbitrary and constructed dimensions of . . . gender,” which then allows him and other queers or trans persons to “confront the ‘naturalistic’ gender ecology in the outside world,” “causing modifications within social interactions” (368, 373). Writing the self into theory here thus attests to a more veritable, personal commitment to the articulation of radical queer subjectivities in resistance to the heteronormativity of the existing world.⁵

There is a “queer use,” to borrow Sara Ahmed’s rhetoric,⁶ to narcissism in these texts. In fact, I would say that they pave the way for rethinking the narcissism of the self in autotheory by helping to reveal the limit of Freud’s early influential understanding of narcissism. Nowhere is Freud’s take on narcissism as problematic as when he regards it as a psychological “disturbance,” a problem of perverts and homosexuals (88). It arises when “large amounts of libido of an essentially

homosexual kind are drawn into the formation of the narcissistic ego ideal and find outlet and satisfaction in maintaining it" (96). According to Freud, all libidinal cathexes in this case are no longer distributed to others out there in the world but flow back entirely into the ego, and this leads to a certain "end of the world" condition for the narcissist in the sense of taking the narcissist away from the world of others (76). If it is not already clear, this is not the case with *The Argonauts* or *Testo Junkie*, as both point to the attempts of the queer self to negotiate the heteronormative world either with a queer family unit (as in *The Argonauts*) or with a queer community (as in *Testo Junkie*).

The other problem Freud sees with narcissism is that the pursuit of the ideal ego is fraught with censorship or opposition from both familial and social structures or institutions, thus leading not only to "the non-fulfilment of this ideal" but also repression (101, 94). Freud's recommendation, then, is sublimation, "a process that concerns object-libido and consists in the instinct's directing itself towards an aim other than and remote from, that of sexual satisfaction" (94). This non-sexualized focusing of psychic energy onto another object would be the "way out, a way by which those demands [of the ego] can be met *without* involving repression" (95). However, this "deflection from sexuality" is also a form of repression, a suppression of queer subjectivity with all its queer sexual desires (94). In other words, Freud's treatment of/for narcissism does not allow for a care for the queer self, unlike the narcissistic trajectory of autotheory, which gives voice not only to all the affects that surround the self in its everyday negotiations with other people, things, and the environment, but also to all the self's sexual desires and practices.

A more useful way to understand the importance of narcissism in autotheory, then, is to turn to Foucault and his formulation of the care for the self. It has to be recognized, however, that a discourse on the care for the self as Foucault wanted it had a rather troubled emergence. As is now well known, Foucault was preoccupied with such a discourse toward the end of his life, beginning with *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* lectures at the Collège de France from 1981–1982, through the seminar on "The Technologies of the Self" at the University of Vermont in 1982, to the work on *The History of Sexuality*, the third volume of which, published in 1984, is titled *The Care for the Self*. A care for the self, as Foucault observed in the Vermont seminar, barely had any place

in 1980s culture and society, as modes of being then were still governed by influences from two major strands of thought that had driven Western civilization: Christian ideology, which presented itself as a paradigm of morality and demanded a certain renunciation of the self; and theoretical philosophy from Descartes to Husserl, which placed a premium on knowledge rather than care (of the self). The respect for “external law” during that time too, as Foucault saw it, was an expression of moral deference to others (“Technologies” 22). The idea of a care for the self was incongruent with social, cultural, and intellectual codes, if not “immoral” (“Technologies” 22). Care for the self thus had to take a back seat—and not for the first time in history. In Foucault’s analysis, Socrates and Plato had privileged the quest for the knowledge of the self (*gnothi sauton*) over care for the self (*epimelēsthai sauton*) in their readings of the Delphic oracle of “know thyself”; that was followed, however, in the Hellenistic era, by a return to the self, a conversion toward a care for the self, before Christian morality overturned it once again.

Foucault was clearly inspired by that Hellenistic conversion and believed yet another conversion toward a care for the self possible. More critically, he did not think the conversion in the Hellenistic era complete: the question of sexuality was bracketed, as he argued through a reading of Marcus Aurelius’s letter of 114–45 to his teacher Fronto, alongside other forms of existence such as the self in sickness and madness.⁷ In this respect, Foucault envisioned a reanimation of the discourse on the care for the self with a focus on the self’s deviant sexual desires. This, for him, constituted a revolutionary conversion that would allow for the articulation of a self, or even selves, that could potentially defy heteronormativity. And this care for the self must be written in particular ways. Drawing again from Hellenistic practices of caring for the self, Foucault underscored that if “the self is something to write about, a theme or object (subject) of writing activity,” it had to be one that paid “attention . . . to nuances of life, mood, and reading” (“Technologies” 27, 28). In other words, it needed to be attuned to everyday life, an attunement that could be as banal as noting down ordinary routines, rather than proceeding with pedagogical functions as was the case in the texts produced in Socrates’s and Plato’s time. Put in more contemporary terms, the mode of writing that is concerned with a care for the self would very much be the inscription of the self’s “ordinary affects,” as Kathleen Stewart would have it. The quotidian dimension would

also mean that such a writing toward a care for the self could be democratically available to anyone. Anyone could write this discourse, in contrast once again to Socrates's or Plato's time, where only the elites had the luxury to think about a care for the self. Foucault's texts of the period between 1981 and 1984 were no doubt formative in the creation of a revolutionary queer conversion toward a care for the self that dared speak the truth of one's sexual desires and practices. However, it is very much in our present century that the written discourses on such a care for the self really have come to the fore and proliferated in literary and/or theoretical culture, especially in the genre increasingly known as autotheory.⁸

DARK NARCISSISM, OR A VERITABLE CARE FOR THE SELF

Amidst the proliferation of discourses that assume a Foucauldian care for the self, I am most interested in a topic that has received too little attention, what I called at the beginning of this essay a darker care for the self, one that involves a somber, if not perverse, narcissism. This dark narcissism in *A Dialogue on Love* and *Appendix Project* is, as with the narcissistic dimension of autotheory, inimical to Freud's formulations. For my project, Ovid's Narcissus more instructive. Narcissus is very much the queer subject, to put it in today's terms: desired by both males and females and attracted to both, yet never yielding to any of them because of an unwavering pride in his own beauty. One could say that Narcissus's way of going about his life as a careless seducer was an art of living that took care of his self's sexual desires and pleasures, but in solipsistic ways. This results in his rejection of Echo, making her flee to the caves where, with "unsleeping grief," her body wasted away, leaving her with nothing except her voice (1.510). As if in line with poetic justice, there is no happy ending for Narcissus either. One might attribute his eventual demise to Nemesis, the goddess of vengeance, when she grants the wish of one of Narcissus's spurned admirers for Narcissus himself to likewise never attain his beloved. Yet, one should not forget that prior to Nemesis's intervention, Tiresias had already foretold that Narcissus could have lived a long life on the condition that "he knows himself—not" (1.449). (There is no doubt a semantic distance between the Latin original of that utterance—*si se non noverit*—and the negative form of the Greek *gnothi sauton* ("know thyself"), but it is interesting that already in Ovid, prior to Foucault, there is a caution against knowledge

of the self.) Narcissus's "know himself" moment arrives when he realizes that the reflection in the pool, that "singular boy" whom he desires so much, the "immaterial hope" with which he is obsessed, is none other than himself (1.588, 1.536). The image, unlike the Freudian ego ideal, is not a repressed self excavated from Narcissus's past. Neither is it an object of sublimation, since it is not a desexualized other (in Ovid's tale, Narcissus does make himself sexually attractive and available to the image). Instead, the image is a part of Narcissus's self that he has never known or encountered before, apparently altogether different from any image of himself reflected in other pools.

What Narcissus comes up against, then, can be said to be the "not-I" or "not-me" that is still very much part of the self. And it does appear that Narcissus practices some form of care for the self obsessed with that not-I or not-me, a care that is no doubt perverse, for it involves ignoring his hunger and fatigue. Narcissus is willing to let his existence slip away while obsessing over his image: "neither his hunger nor his need for rest / can draw him off; prone on the shaded grass, / his insatiate stare fixed on that false shape, / he perishes by his own eyes" (1.564–67). And even after he knows that the image is essentially his own, there is still no abandoning that form of care for the obsessed self. He remains prone on the ground, the body still in pain from yearning for the image and now grieving over the impossibility of ever attaining it (1.577, 1.610).

As the story goes, this is how "he dissolves, wasted by his passion" (1.633). In my reading, another more desperate and potentially fatal gesture on Narcissus's part, is his desire "to plunge/ his arms into the water" (1.552–553). Certainly, it is but a "shallow pool" (1.582), and one would hardly drown by just diving into it, but Narcissus's goal would be to embrace the image, to be with the image, hence an implicit renunciation of ever coming up for air again should he be able to grasp the image in his dives. Furthermore, upon recognizing his own image, Narcissus also says that "death is no grave matter," and looks toward death, since it is "in death" that he and his image will "merge as one" (1.612, 1.615). The Narcissus story bespeaks a care for the self that heeds the self's desire to depart from existence; it is a care that is willing, in turn, to put life at risk.

To put this another way, Narcissus's plunge goes further than "the plunging view" [*la vue plongeante*] that Foucault has identified as another element of a care for the self. Not unlike Narcissus staring into the

image at the pool's edge, between life and death, "the plunging view" according to Foucault is one that is adopted "at the point where one is at the edges of life and death, where one is at the threshold of existence" (*L'Herméneutique* 272). At such a point, one deliberates on whether "to kill oneself or continue to live" (273); it is the point of symmetry between suicide and living on. In Foucault, the plunging view acknowledges that while there are "a thousand scourges of the body and the soul, wars, banditries, death, and sufferings" on earth, there are also "all the splendors" in this very same world, hence keeping one's gaze "on this world" rather than on another (above, typically) (273, 271). This is how the plunging view leads toward the optimistic choice of living on.

In contrast to Foucault, I would like to consider the pessimistic side of the symmetry, that is, the side of suicide, thus pushing the plunging view deeper into the dark recesses of existence. Yet I would also like to suggest that this dark side constitutes no less a care for the self, if we are willing to acknowledge that some, without reason even, do desire a departure from existence, a real out of ek-sistence.⁹ Some might come to see, understand, feel, and accept such desire as nevertheless an irreducible part of themselves: a part of the self that no talk therapy, no cognitive behavior therapy, no psychiatric or pharmaceutical intervention can ever absolutely dispel. For some, then, to be attentive to this part of the self, to allow it to articulate the desire for that ek-sistence, to articulate all the struggles and failures of that ek-sistence, would be a real care for the self, the freedom of being in this world, no matter if they are opting for, and looking toward, an exit from that being. No doubt, attention to all this generates a rather depressive discourse of a care for the self, but as Timothy Morton has said, "trying to escape depression is depressing" (147).

AUTO-THANATO-THEORY: SEDGWICK'S *A DIALOGUE*
ON LOVE AND ZAMBRENO'S APPENDIX PROJECT

The care for the self that is both narcissistic and depressive writes itself out in Eve Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love*, a text that is mostly a memoir of her work with a therapist, Shannon Van Wey. A hybrid text of prose, poetry, and intercalations of notes written from Wey, it seeks to make sense of, if not theorize, both Sedgwick's experiences in therapy and her relationship with her therapist across sessions aimed at treating her depression in the wake of her breast cancer diagnosis. It is a text,

then, written by a body that is, like Narcissus, in pain or, as the first-person narrator of the text says, a body “bursting out of my / eye sockets with pain” (6). Nonetheless, a narcissistic self-absorption cuts across the text, which is most emphatically on display in both Sedgwick’s relationship with her mother and her therapist. When the sessions explore her childhood, Sedgwick recounts her struggle to feel adequately loved by her mother, as she is constantly frustrated by not being the “favorite daughter” as compared to her sister Nina (123). Similarly in her relationship with her therapist, Sedgwick wants to be “truly *exceptional among his patients*,” and even often wonders if he is in love with her (167). To feed this latter narcissism, she asks a lot of Shannon’s time and attention, a demand she admits is aimed at taking Shannon away from his wife (124). Unsurprisingly, then, in Shannon’s evaluation, she is indeed “transparently narcissistic,” and that pronouncement comes after a session where Shannon “completely missed” recognizing Sedgwick’s personality as “demonic, powerful, and unique (in an anomalous sense)” (108, 101). For Sedgwick, the sessions with Shannon “let [her] indulge that desire . . . to *show oneself to be loved*,” in contrast to past sessions with other therapists, where she only felt “a particular impasse . . . wedged so firmly” between them (116, 6).

The sessions might be occasions for a certain self to come to be loved: the self that wants to be the “favorite daughter” or the “exceptional” patient. With regard to the book as a text or discourse that sees to a care for the self, however, there is another self at stake: a self that desires ek-sistence, a self with the “wicked thought” of wanting to die (17). For Sedgwick, that self is ineradicable: it structures her being; it constitutes her “ontological problem” (15). To be sure, it is a problem only in the eyes of psychology and psychiatry. Otherwise, as *A Dialogue on Love* attests, that self is what Sedgwick desires to sustain. So, when she postulates that the mark of successful therapy might be when she would “stop feeling the want of being dead,” she immediately regrets that possibility, reasserting that that very feeling is “such a deep, old fact about [herself],” suspecting that being supposedly freed from the desire for ek-sistence “could be a *terrible* index of what might change” (111). That no therapy will be able to dissolve such a self becomes rather evident toward the end of the text, when Shannon believes that Sedgwick “is experiencing a change in her relationship with death—some-what that it is a simple fact, not that it waits soon for her, or that it is

something she seeks" (184).¹⁰ However, Sedgwick has a quick rejoinder that states that "one of the main ways [she is] using Shannon is as an excuse to be more withdrawn," by which the "return to [her] unskilled, unsociable demeanor feels just right," and that "there were something true, or vital, in all that old shyness" (197).

In other words, the self that wants out of existence is that which Sedgwick wants to see remain through and after therapy; it is the self that she wants to come through in the text that is *A Dialogue on Love*. This is the self for which the text is a care. Thus, when Sedgwick says at the end of the text, "I love that his care for me was not care for *me*" (219), the latter "*me*" is the self with "the longing for death" (96). And that "care for *me*" can be in effect only as the written text or discourse that is *A Dialogue on Love*, the text by which the self that seeks an exit from the world can be articulated, by which such desires can be expressed, by which all its affects about its failed existence and/or failed ek-sistence can be written. It is a text through which Sedgwick can stay with her "groundtone" of sadness (62), through which she can say to herself, if not to her other self:

That's enough. You can
Stop now.
Stop: living, that is.
And *enough*: hurting. (69)

A Dialogue on Love is a text within the space of which she can say to herself, "you don't have to live anymore" (69). In this sense, the text becomes a record of her sense of failure in not dying, in not being able to die at the right time, despite and/or in spite of the desire to die: the failure she calls a "different failure" from failing to feel really alive (18). Sedgwick has written a text through which she can articulate or express her desire not just to die but also to feel already dead. That is why she will, while looking back at an incident where Shannon unknowingly retraces a path she had taken earlier, consider herself a spectral being, which is also that "*me*" for which Shannon can never care (219).

Such a discourse on a care for the self produces a textual space in and through which it is possible to articulate the truth of longing to die or feeling already dead. In other words, it serves as a space of *parrhesia*—another term Foucault highlights in discourses on the care for the

self in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. But the parrhesia in *A Dialogue on Love* is more radical than daring to speak the truth of one's deviant sexual desires as Foucault wanted it, since it bespeaks the brutal honesty of wanting to see to the extinguishment of the self. In other words, the discourse on a care for the self in *A Dialogue on Love* does not, or will not, bring happiness. Nor can it pave the way toward the perfectibility of the self, or the constitution of a true subject according to Foucault; the discourse on a dark narcissistic care for the self reveals what I have called the "reject" in oneself, which I hear reverberate in Sedgwick's self-declaration of "I, the refusal/of a refusal" (150).¹¹ Neither does this discourse of the care for the self in *A Dialogue on Love* affirm, or promise, any community—not even with Sedgwick's therapist, as long as there is that "me" that must be withdrawn from Shannon's care (and this is not to mention Sedgwick's general sense of abandonment that cuts deeply across *A Dialogue on Love*). In other words, although there might be an endeavor at some form of community with Shannon, even a semblance of such a community is barely sustainable (and one can say that about the love, as Sedgwick defined it, between them too¹²).

A Dialogue on Love, therefore, exposes how Sedgwick must essentially go it alone in her care for the self that seeks ek-sistence. Put another way, what Sedgwick's text highlights is the fact that even though the sense of ek-sistence might be a common enough experience, how each self senses it, how each self experiences the affects that arise through it, and the types of affects that each self experiences, are never exactly the same. The sense of ek-sistence can only be a shared unshareability. A text on such a dark narcissistic care for the self is thus but a parrhesia and a reaffirmation of the solitary shared unshareability of the sense of ek-sistence. Other than that, it is admittedly unproductive or inoperative, an "un-work" or *désœuvrement*, particularly in relation to productive life. Put otherwise, inscribing such a care for the self may be another "cruel optimism," though not one that keeps faith with the promise of the good (capitalist) life as outlined by Lauren Berlant, but one that believes in another chance, another day, for ek-sistence: an extension, then, as Sedgwick says, of the "thread for the labyrinth" (197).

Kate Zambreno's *Appendix Project* further illustrates that shared unshareability, that is, the recognition that not all autotheory texts

(or even those that might now be called auto-thanato-theory) follow that “thread for the labyrinth” toward ek-sistence, but resist it in the sense of not readily acknowledging or recognizing it. On the surface, *Appendix Project* does seem to push back against the draw of ek-sistence. Nevertheless, as I read it, that draw is irreducibly undeniable, and an auto-thanato-theory has already begun to inscribe itself within the text. *Appendix Project* is manifestly a collection of talks by Zambreno, which also includes a few written essays. It is slightly more than that, however, given that it is consciously and carefully edited such that it also includes supplementary afterthoughts on the talks. In a sense it is a narcissistic work, given that the talks/essays all pertain to her writing processes or experiences with regard to her *Book of Mutter* (2017). *Book of Mutter* is a work of mourning, one that allows Zambreno to work through her grief over her deceased mother. With references to Roland Barthes, Virginia Woolf, Louise Bourgeois, Luce Irigaray, Marguerite Duras, and other writers or artists who have written either about similar griefs or about motherhood (mother in German is *Mutter*). In it Zambreno is able to begin articulating—not lucidly but through a series of mutterings, as she would profess—her experiences of caring for her dying mother, which brought them close in ways never experienced before when her mother was well, and then of those when her mother died. On the theoretical level, *Appendix Project* allows Zambreno to register the authorial regrets for what she had failed to include and elements that she felt compelled to take out in *Book of Mutter*. In her own words, *Appendix Project* is where she finds herself “circling back on [her] failure and errata” (54). Yet that “circling back” enables Zambreno to attempt at a theorization of what a book and/or literature is, which, to her, is no less a failure, as long as a work “feels [like] a shadow of what . . . could have [been] written” (54). That a book and/or literature is a failure is compounded by the sense that it always seems to need an appendix, which is as much a mark of failure, since the appendix is “seen as unnecessary or excessive to the *body* of a text” (65). On a more personal level, *Appendix Project*, allows her to continue mourning the death of her mother, enlisting once again more or less the same literary and aesthetic references in *Book of Mutter*, but this time with Zambreno experiencing motherhood herself. On both levels, then, *Appendix Project* is a text not unlike Nelson’s *Argonauts*, where the personal is made public, although with a different subject matter.

Nevertheless, the narcissistic dimension in *Appendix Project* paves the way for a care for the self akin to that in Sedgwick's project. Zambreno's work eventually arrives at the realization that "to write of grief, which is to write of solitude, is to write the banal details of a life" (120), and the Foucauldian care for the self is invested in the recording of everyday routines and ordinary thoughts. As Foucault observed in his *Hermeneutics of the Subject* lectures, ordinary thoughts also include meditations on death. The deaths that more explicitly haunt *Appendix Project* are those of Zambreno's mother, Barthes's mother, and Barthes's own. Zambreno, however, has also inscribed her proximity with, if not approach toward, death.

This proximity is evident in the first appendix (A), where she mentions On Kawara's series of telegrams catalogued under the title "I AM ALIVE," which began in 1969, and which include the three telegrams that respectively announce "I AM NOT GOING TO COMMIT SUICIDE DON'T WORRY," "I AM NOT GOING TO COMMIT SUICIDE WORRY," and "I AM GOING TO SLEEP FORGET IT" (13). This is not a mere passive observation on the part of Zambreno, for she will, toward the end of that appendix, somewhat assume On Kawara's voice or standpoint and write, "I do not know how I will die. . . . But as I write this, and hopefully as you hear this, I am still alive" (30). There is clearly an affect that passes from the telegrams to Zambreno, and it is an affect characteristic of ek-sistence, as the declarations "I am alive" (both On Kawara's and Zambreno's) and "I am not going to commit suicide" actually betray a desire for death. These subtending thoughts are similar to those which arise when she looks at photographs of her half-sister: "special, singular, then fading away, in the background, when there are new babies. She disappears from the second album, becomes the ghost. I don't know why I have such a need to catalogue this, to archive it into language. I doubt that it is interesting to others, except perhaps the feeling underneath it" (39). Here, the thought of ek-sistence is also betrayed by Zambreno's fascination with things spectral, particularly ghosts. Elsewhere, she also thinks of writing as "following after ghosts" (33), and as a writer, she says that she is "the ghost, hovering over, . . . attempting to come closer" to those other ghosts (143). She also writes of how, "when [she is] extremely sleep deprived," she is "convinced that [she is] a ghost" (47). In another context, while reflecting on mothering to her infant daughter while mourning for her mother, she wonders

if she is “closer to life, and thus closer to death” (19). It is in these senses that *Appendix Project* approximates itself to a care for the self that approaches ek-sistence.

To be sure, Zambreno has written that “writing for [her] is a form of resilience” (131). Yet, her discourse of resilience, perhaps of necessity, sustains an intimate proximity with the care for the self that wants out of existence. As Zambreno notes, the anatomical appendix can at times fail, and when that happens, it has to be removed. What remains, then, is only “impending death,” and life, no matter how resilient, must recognize the “vestigial remnants” of existence, which only have death in sight (77, 131). All of this is to say that if *Appendix Project*, as Zambreno claims, is a literary or aesthetic extension of the thought of such failure, then it must also acknowledge the deathly horizon. This is how *Appendix Project* is also already an auto-thanato-theory text, particularly in its relationship with *Book of Mutter*, in which Zambreno recalls her childhood “[writing] little suicide notes and stick[ing] them in [her] school-girl desk,” then acknowledging, “I have a vague desire to die” (102).

Not all autotheory texts are auto-thanato-theory texts. The sense of ek-sistence might be present in Preciado’s *Testo Junkie*, as suggested by the narrating self’s continued communication with dead lovers, if not by the following lines toward the end of the text—“I wanted to decapitate myself, cut off my head that had been molded by a program of gender, dissect part of the molecular model that resides in me. This book is the trace left by that cut” (424). But it is barely there in Nelson’s *Argonauts*. My proposal, then, is that while we extend our inquiries further into autotheory, and while we expand its archive, we should also keep an eye out for auto-thanato-theory that writes the self’s search for extinguishment, if not its sense of having already departed from the world; we should not suppress these voices or affects of auto-thanato-theory, but let them be articulated. That allowance would only be—paradoxical as it may be—a practice of a care for the self especially attentive to selves that want a real out of existence. A veritable sense of existence is not only about living or staying alive; it includes the desire for an exit from existence. And perhaps it is through the dark narcissism of autotheory that we will learn to acknowledge that desire—without moral, religious, and philosophical judgment—and get closer to a more complete sense of existence.

NOTES

1. With the term “auto-thanato-theory,” I have in mind Frédéric Weinmann’s notion of an “autothanatographic narration,” which is based, in turn, largely on Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe’s and Derrida’s respective readings of Blanchot. Since Weinmann’s work deals with texts of French theory, I am purposefully omitting discussion of it.

2. On some of the characterization of autotheory, see for example the dossier on *The Argonauts* in *Angelaki* Vol. 23 No. 1 (2018), especially the contributions from Kaye Mitchell, Monica B. Pearl, and Robyn Wiegman.

3. I am aware that “care of the self” is the common translation of Foucault’s “le souci de soi.” I am indeed modifying the translation, replacing the preposition “of” with “for,” preferring the phrase “care for the self.” As I see it, the preposition “for” indicates a clear, active intent of taking all direct measures of care for the self; I would even say that it underscores the narcissistic dimension—important for this essay—of such a care, which I suspect Foucault was cautious to play down, given that attention to the self was frowned upon during his time. “Care of the self,” to me, takes quite a distance from the self, with less direct or active involvement, adopting a position akin to looking from above. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, “care of” indicates an “oversight with a view to protection, preservation, or guidance.”

4. Of course, Preciado is no passive worker and/or consumer. There is no doubt that through his critique he aspires to disrupt the “pharmacopornographic” complex, just as the “autopornographic body” living among “impoverished populations,” yet having “the technical means of producing cyberpornography,” has actually, according to Preciado, “sabotaged a monopoly that was until now controlled by the big multinationals of porn” (38).

5. Authenticity is at stake here too. As Preciado makes clear at the beginning of *Testo Junkie*, he keeps in mind Derrida’s comment that what has been glaringly absent in philosophies of sexual difference is the sex lives of the philosophers. Preciado consciously fills that gap by laying bare his queer/trans sex life in the text.

6. See Ahmed *What’s the Use?*

7. Foucault’s reading of this letter was first introduced in one of the *Hermeutics of the Subject* lectures at the Collège de France, then reiterated in the “Technologies of the Self” seminar at the University of Vermont.

8. I am omitting the history between Foucault’s 80s and our contemporary present. That history would have to cover, among other events, the phenomenon of the AIDS epidemic, the development of both queer and affect theories, and the advancement of what Foucault would call “technologies of production” in the forms of social media apparatuses such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These advanced “technologies of production” have evidently generated a contemporary selfie culture, which, in turn, have arguably made our times more accepting and

embracing of discourses on a (narcissistic) care for the self. This historical narrative is beyond the scope of this essay.

9. The idea of *ek-sistence* goes back to Heidegger in his *Being and Time*, which is later picked up by Jean-Luc Nancy, reiterating it in terms of *hors de soi* or “outside oneself” (in *Corpus*, for example), so as to conceptualize existence in a way freed from the fixed, stable, representational category of the philosophical Subject. This is not the space for a discussion on Heidegger or Nancy. I will simply say here that I am pushing things further than Heidegger and Nancy in taking literally the *ek-*, seriously thinking the desire to get out (*ek-*) of existence.

10. Quotation modified: Shannon’s notes appear in all caps in *A Dialogue on Love*.

11. On the “reject,” see my *The Reject: Community, Politics, and Religion after the Subject*.

12. Love, as Sedgwick tries to conceptualize through her relationship with Shannon, is “a matter of suddenly, globally, ‘knowing’ that another person represents your only access to some vitally / transmissible truth / or radiantly heightened / mode of perception” (168). Sedgwick claims in the text that such a love does not bear “sexual connotations” (168), but the text will reveal that Sedgwick cannot resist entertaining possible sexual relations with Shannon.

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