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Autotheory: An Autoethnographic Reading of Foucault

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In this article, the author plays with the dialectical relationship between theory and autobiography. Interrupting her theoretical interpretation of Foucault's understanding of the body and subject with autoethnographic pieces that function as illustrations and/or counterpoints to her summary of his theories, the author suggests there is no "right" understanding and use of theory but only autotheoretical interpretations.

Keywords: Foucault; body/subject; autobiography; autoethnography; poststructural methods

A couple of years ago, I took a graduate course titled "Women and the Construction of Knowledge." For a final project, I agreed to write a paper on feminism and Foucault. Becoming engrossed in the topic, my reading took me long past the end of spring semester and into the summer months. As fall semester approached, I felt I had to complete this project to focus on my upcoming course load. Consumed with guilt, I handed my professor a final paper, an overview of Foucault without any feminist critiques. The day I was scheduled to meet my professor, I was filled with trepidation: Would she accept this paper for a women's studies course when I did not include feminism? Sitting down at the table with her, I avoided eye contact as she pulled my paper from her bag. "Jodi, this is a fabulous feminist reading of Foucault." Trying to hide my shock, I thanked her and listened to the rest of her comments on my paper. I have been continually baffled by this experience. How could this brilliant professor read my work as feminist? Did I read, without conscious effort, Foucault through a feminist lens?

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Two months ago, I was having coffee with an English professor from my university. As our discussion began to focus on Butler, she said, "Your reading of Butler is different than mine; in education, you must focus on different aspects than we do."

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My initial internal response was "Did I read Butler wrong?" But, no, that is not what she was saying. She was noting, with interest, the different ways we use Butler, the different aspects we choose to emphasize and combine into meaning for ourselves.

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These experiences have encouraged me to contemplate my use and interpretation of theory. Understanding myself as a text, a discursive template writing the world and being written by the world, I am an autobiography that is read through other texts (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). I have come to recognize that in a dialectical process, every text I read is interpreted and rewritten through my own biography and my autobiography is rewritten as I read it through alternate texts, a reciprocal writing and rewriting. According to this understanding, not only is there no "real" Foucault for me to use as the underpinning theoretical framework for my work but also each use of theory is constructed through the autobiography of the researcher and interpreted and rewritten through the autobiography of the reader.

Playing further with the dialectical relation between theory and autobiography, in the following I present an autotheoretical reading of Foucault's examination of the formation of the modern body and subject through disciplinary power and bio-power. I will interrupt my theoretical interpretations of Foucault with autoethnographic pieces, textual vignettes of my life gathered through journal entries and books read. These autoethnographic pieces function as illustrations and/or counterpoints to my summary of Foucault's theories. In this way, I attempt to represent not only my understanding of Foucault's body/subject but also that the theoretical understandings that we use to underpin our work are in a sense simulacra (Baudrillard, 1988) or in other words, constructions of constructions, texts read through text, interpretations formed through our own body/subject.

Throughout the remainder of this article, the font of the text indicates the source of the piece. I use a normal font for my reading of Foucault, an *italic* font for journal entries, and a **bold** font for direct quotes from published texts, both theoretical and literary. I will allow these readings to lie side by side without explicit interpretation so that the reader may listen to the complex interrelation between the texts, between autobiography and theory.

AUTO THEORETICAL READING OF FOUCAULT'S BODY/SUBJECT

I have no essential self. The "I" which I understood as myself is formed in multiple, interconnected relations of disciplinary power and bio-power (Foucault, 1980, 1984a, 1990). Disciplinary power is power that functions through the academic disciplines—biology, physiology, psychology, for example—and power that functions through techniques of discipline—

surveillance, normalizing judgments, and examinations. Bio-power, which invaded disciplinary power in the 17th century, is power focused at the target of life. These powers do not emerge from a central location or specific subject but instead, are exercised through tactics, connecting together, propagating, forming comprehensible systems whose objectives and aims are clearly visible and yet have not been invented by any one party. Disciplinary power and bio-power have as their object the body, writing on the materiality of my flesh and bones, constituting postures, gestures, and attitudes, inscribing me as a modern body/subject.

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What or who? I cannot name myself. The alchemist worked with a magic mirror, using reflection to guide them. The hall of mirrors set around me has been angled to distort. Is that me in the shop-glass? Is that me in the family photo? Is that me in the office window? Is that me in the silvered pages of a magazine? Is that me in the broken bottles on the street? Everywhere I go, reflection. Everywhere a caught image of who I am. In all of that who am I? (Winterson, 1997, p. 12)

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Her toes were an enigma. The large toe was indeed large, almost bulbous. The other four were small, like little pinches of dough stuck on the end of her foot. "It couldn't be broken," he said. "There is not enough to break." People had always made fun of her toes. Interestingly, it did not bother her. They were, in fact, quite funny. Her Uncle's toes it was said, were webbed. But his were long, like fingers. I never saw them; he always kept them covered by thin nylon socks. Dark, if I remember correctly. The image of Daryl's toes gave the appendage a sense of magic, humor, and unimportance.

My breasts are not much larger than my toes. In a game my daughter and her friend were playing one afternoon, Zeba's were firm nectarines; Collen's were juicy grapefruits. Mine were apricots. In the middle of the game, my husband walked past the door, stuck his head in, and said, "I didn't know she had any." Ouch!

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A collage of breasts hung over my nephew's bed. He thought they were elbows. "Grandma, do you want to see my elbows?" If anything, they were knees.

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Disciplinary power, power functioning through the disciplines and disciplinary techniques, have facilitated the constitution of my body/subject (Foucault, 1980, 1984a, 1990). Relations of power functioning through disciplinary strands of thought, such as biology, physiology, psychology, have constituted me as a self with a material outside and a psychological inside.

My body is defined by biology, physiology, and medicine, and my psychology implicitly interpreted through psychoanalysis.

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The penis needs to be large enough to support masculinity (in the eyes of the parents and the child). If it is really a penis, it will push the child toward the "male" gender role, even, as the last example shows, if the child is a girl. (Kessler, 2002, p. 39)

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The chubby little boy with the crew cut and freckles began the taunts, the others soon joined in. I ran; they chased. Tripping over the root of a tree, the tea set flew from my hands and broke. "My tea set. My tea set," I cried. My mother, fury set on her face, appeared, shaking her index finger in the faces of the boys, loudly and harshly conveying her reprimand.

This is the only time I can remember my mother coming to my rescue. Is that why I remember this story? Did she teach me in that moment that if I played girl and was abused by men, she might show up to protect me? Desiring desperately her protection, did I continue to construct my life narratives around a similar plot in which she could play the part of hero? Never showing up to say her lines, did I perform the narrative repetitively, waiting for her appearance? Is the linkage, then, caused by the function of my wound?

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As I am constituted through the disciplines, I emerge through the disciplinary techniques—surveillance, normalizing judgments, and the examination. I am the effect of these functions of power. "Certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourse, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals" (Foucault, 1990, p. 98).

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"Young ladies do not scratch in public," said my father. "But why?" I asked. "No one loves a woman who touches her own body," he said.

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There is a becoming-woman, a becoming child, that does not resemble the woman or the child as clearly distinct molar entities . . . what we term a molar entity is, for example, the woman as defined by her form, endowed with organs and functions and assigned as a subject. Becoming woman is not imitating this entity . . . becoming-woman must first be understood as a function of something else; not imitating or assuming the female form, but

emitting particles that enter the relation of movement and rest, or the zone of proximity, of a microfemininity, in other words, that produce in us a molecular woman . . . the woman has to become-woman in order that the man also becomes- or can become-woman. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 275-276)

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Disciplinary power, functioning through the mechanism of surveillance, subjects one to a continuous gaze. As evidenced in the panopticon, the subject is watched by others, watches herself, and watches others (Foucault, 1980). Butler (1997) spoke of this gaze of the Other, as a power in recoil. The power of the gaze turns back on itself and becomes internalized as the subject's own conscience. Thus, I become my own Other, prohibiting my thoughts, actions, drives, and desires.

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He had bad breath. Sometimes she tasted the taste of that smell in her mouth. Swallowing it as her own, it was his maggots that festered on her tonsils, producing puss pockets that embedded themselves in her throat. She would, when the taste and smell grew too strong, stand in front of the mirror, open her mouth wide, insert her index finger in her mouth and press just below a small yellow mass, squeezing out the infection. It would stick to her finger and she would raise the yellow segments to her nose and inhale. It smelled of meat gone bad; it smelled of shit; it smelled of his breath. Yet, there was something desirable in the ritual, feeling as if she was somehow cleansing herself of the putridity that infused her body, she found pleasure in the smell. As a good fart released under the confines of the blankets at night, when you pull the covers over your head and inhale deeply, filling your lungs with the stench and at once being repulsed and filled with a sublime joy.

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Surveillance also functions through an obsession with details (Foucault, 1984a). A discourse arose in the 1800s in which no detail about the subject was too minute for observation and documentation; every move, gesture, word, and performance was noted. Through this meticulous practice of surveillance, a form of biography arose that went beyond the descriptive, delving into the cause of behaviors, composing an inseparable link between the deed and the subject, forming categorical positions of the normal and the abnormal. Thus, I became the autonomous agent of my deeds as well as categorized into positions of ab/normal. This categorization not only constitutes my intelligibility within institutionalized normalcy, marginalizing the abnormal to the constituted outside, but also makes power invisible and me responsible for my classification through my deeds.

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I figured out why I hate c-1's. They remind me of gimps from WWI or II. Those men without legs who are mobilizing themselves on little pieces of wood with four wheels, all upper body and no legs, scooting along the sidewalk. I must have seen it in a movie somewhere? It is a disconcerting picture. Whitney is a damn good boater. Can you image a c-1 in a kayak, going over Bull Sluice, smooth as glass. But watching him paddle to the eddy, I had to look away, for it is all contortion without legs. I don't like it. Funny, it makes me not sure of him. Talking to him at the takeout, I had that funny feeling like I was speaking with someone disabled. Kept looking for the disability to appear or his legs to disappear. He was like a mermaid out of water. I am afraid of him?

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Mainstream narratives such as Roseanne that deliberately include lesbian characters try to exploit the virtues of visibility ostensibly for politically laudatory reasons, but at the same time they tend to reproduce sexual ideology all the more insidiously. While they appear to be open and supportive to diversity, they recontain the lesbian resoundingly, publicly, indubitably within the spectacularly heteronormative family. (Roof, 1996, p. xxxv)

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Entering the restaurant, she felt confident, shoulders back, strode deliberately up to the counter. Two, nonsmoking. Seated she found it difficult to maintain a conversation. The other woman talked and talked. She tried to listen. Staring at her face as she spoke, uttering, what she hoped were the appropriate sighs of approval. But I found it difficult to listen. Not that it was not interesting, or that it was benign, but that I seemed to be on a different realm and trying to maintain a presence where I was not. Knowing that I am inauthentic, I become incapacitated in my responses. This social ritual of conversation is an enigma to me. I can hear my father complain of the conversations of others—shallow. How does one convey the moment without being shallow? How do you converse without the judgment of self? A flamboyant moment, speech flies, the body jerks, a retrospective moment erupts, shattering the experience. It begins to loop, the patheticism of the me, the paralysis of dementia.

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Disciplinary power functioning through normalizing judgments revolves around the infliction of punishment for the slightest deviation. I am punished for not living up to the rule of order, rules which are defined by the observable and natural process of their functioning (Foucault, 1984a). The aim of normalizing judgments is to differentiate me in relation to the norm, place me on a hierarchy in terms of value, constrain and conform me, and delimit my difference as a body/subject. According to Foucault (1984a), "The perpetual pen-

ality that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchies, homogenizes, and excludes. In short, it normalizes" (p. 195).

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I am dying in a surge of remorse. It is a depression that leaks from within. It begins as an urge that leaks and fills my body. I contract. I try to act normal. I try to carry on a conversation. I listen, I do not hear. I want her to get out of my car and go home. I desire contact. I do not want her here. I contract. My face becomes tight, the pores enlarge, the color pales. My breath becomes swallow. I have to think to deepen it. Yet even with thought, it remains a singular inhalation. I breathe to the hollow in my throat. No more. I want to weep. There is no reason.

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Disciplinary power functioning as the examination is another technique that joins with surveillance and normalization in constituting me as a body/subject. The examination, through ritualized ceremonies and extensive documentation, judges and classifies, making me an objectified unit. As I am individualized, I am simultaneously categorized into an identity category of the social body, classes that are homogenized through the compilation and organization of data (Foucault, 1984a).

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There is a dirt road covered with large pieces of gravel that make me trip. After running over the little wooden bridge, three wooden planks, swollen with water, slick with moss, that spans the creek, I come to a house. A large, two-story country house, yellow with white trim and a white wraparound porch. On the porch, left of the front door, are three black plastic office chairs, rust eating the legs. A red Ford pickup and white Chevy Bronco are parked in the back, next to a self-standing garage. The lawn, marbled with ankle-high grasses and red Georgia clay, is scattered with brightly colored plastic toys, neon lime green, florescent pink, grape juice purple. Tricycles, apparently abandoned as attention was diverted elsewhere, stand upright or lying on their side, one here, two there. Between the porch and the road, centered between the oak tree and the drive, is a large blue trampoline. The same one I see displayed at K-mart—"Only \$99.95. Use With Supervision." The artifacts sign so loudly, children's high-pitched voices, engines revving under open hoods, boots stomping and bare toes pattering up the front steps, screen door slamming, chairs tilted back on rear legs, Budweisers held in gnarled knuckles, boots crossed on the rails. A life erupting in the daily pattern of chaos. (I don't hear the women, their marks remain invisible to me.) I have never seen anyone at this house. All sound and movement echo in absence. All images are sheathed in signs, reverberating meaning in their traces. I wonder of so much in nothing, the life behind the sign, the traces of non/meaning etched in the ethers of space.

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The nature of sexual difference is not susceptible to empirical testing. It is logically independent of biological facts because already embedded in the language of science, at least when applied to any culturally resonant construal of sexual difference, is the language of gender. (Laquer, 1990, p. 153)

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Bio-power, power which "assumed responsibility for life processes and undertook control to modify them" (Foucault, 1990, p. 142), began to invade disciplinary power in the 18th century. As systems for fulfilling our basic needs increased, less of our time was needed for basic survival and more of our time and energy became available to expend on a myriad of activities to constitute ourselves. This modern body/subject that emerged in the interrelations of bio-power and disciplinary power is characterized by a consciousness "of the discontinuity of time" and an attitude that infuses the subject's mode of relation, thinking, feeling, and behaving (Foucault, 1984b). The subject constituted in this consciousness and attitude "takes oneself as an object of a complex and difficult elaboration"; she makes of her body, behavior, feelings, and passions a work of art, not to discover herself but to invent herself (Foucault, 1984b, p. 42).

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As I cannot live how I desire in the moment, I continue to throw this image to some future date and live in constant apprehension that the vision will not manifest.

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Occasionally, able of self-movement or on a wheel of obsession, I ride a stationary bike at the Ramsey Student Center. I, very much formed by my own structures of habit, always go to my favorite spot, third floor, past the track, through the double fire doors, down the hall to the last bike overlooking the swimming pool two floors below. The most deserted corner. (Deserted corner. I remember so clearly watching Cinderella on television as a child, Leslie Ann Warren, dressed in rags, sitting on a little wooden chair in the corner of the front room. Shoulders drawn together, hands clasped in her lap, eyes directed at the floor, she softly begins to sing. "In my own little corner in my own little chair, I can be whatever I want to be. . . ." Incrementally, the tempo increases, she stands, sings louder, raises her arms, turns. Crescendo. Dancing, graceful, beautiful, free, "I can be whatever I want to be.") I put my headphones on, listen to the sounds punching into my ears, "Can you feel it. Can you feel it." I see nails scratching down someone's back, the red welts rising. I close my eyes, the sounds and images reverberate through my body. I pedal without thought, without awareness.

Sweat runs down my temples, back, between my breasts. My hair is damp, my shirt adheres to my torso. I inhale her anger. I work off of it. "I am here to tell you that since you went away. . . . Can you feel it. Can you feel it." The song ends; another begins. "It is not my fault that you don't love me." The edge dissipates, the anger evaporates in despair. My father flashes before my eyes. "It is not my fault that you didn't love me." I am tired. I open my eyes. The ooze of my father is embossed on the window before me, reflecting an opaque grit in my eyes. I look around, was I singing aloud again? The timer indicates I have 14 minutes to go.

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The hill behind the track was steep and curved to the left. I had to run with my feet wide to maintain balance. Run like a football player. Leaning forward, pumping my arms, inhaling through my nose, exhaling through my mouth, rain running down my face, plastering my T-shirt to my torso, dripping down my legs into my socks, splashing up from the puddles and covering my back with speckles of red clay and brown mud. I was strong; I was fast. I wanted to win. I would work to win. I did not want any help from anyone. To ask for or receive help was cheating. To be worth anything at all, I had to do it solely on my own power and strength. "God, damn you," I yelled, each word carried on its own exhalation. "I don't want Your help. I don't need You." "I am sorry. I am sorry. I did not mean it. Forgive me. Forgive me. I didn't mean it," I panted. Parasitic guilt like a cloud of gnats swarmed in/through/around me. A nebulous filth began to pervade my breath, the stench of guilt flowed from my saliva, filled my bowels, formed/barred the words in my mouth. I exhaled it into each future moment.

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Bio-power functioned to constitute sexuality. Sexuality, according to Foucault (1990), is not a natural, instinctual drive; it is a transfer point for relations of power. It is a social construction, the manifestation of "a great surface network" of discourses, strategies, and knowledges that form the discursive myth of sexuality (Foucault, 1990, p. 105). The deployment of sexuality through its various strategies created the concept of "sex." "Sex" is subordinate to sexuality, for it is through the formation of sexuality that "sex" has arisen as an element necessary for the operation of sexuality.

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There is something about her that soothes me, fascinates me. Her voice is lyrical, soft, not always audible. What she speaks seems to carry such import. She laughs, laughs at herself. She speaks of people in a different dimension. She is wise, spiritual, she says. She talks of others as if they were the "self" behind the trauma of the immediate body/subject. I liked her from the moment I saw her, but it was not an intense drawing, just, "She seems interesting."

Sitting by her at the large table in the conference room, a décor and context juxtaposed to her conversation. She spoke; I listened. I wanted to touch her face. It was an immediate impulse. Listening, I thought what would it be like to lie with this woman. Her body, which on first impression was fat, seemed lush. What would it be like to be held by this woman. What would it be like to touch her, rub her skin, feel her. What would it be like for her to rub me.

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The conception of “sex” contributes several, indispensable functions. It has made it possible to group together “in an artificial unity” multiple elements—biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures—my breasts, my ability to breast feed my child, my role as a mother, my heterosexual desires. Sex offers a causal principle, making it appear that my sexuality is its natural effect. “Sex” makes it possible to evade what gives power its power by enabling me to conceive of power solely as law and taboo. “Sex is the most speculative, most ideal, most internal element in a deployment of sexuality organized by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures” (Foucault, 1990, p. 155). It is through “sex” that I must pass to be intelligible, because it is the hidden and generative principle of meaning. Thus, as a modern body/subject, I am intelligible through the completeness of my body and my identity arises from an obscure nameless urge (Foucault, 1990).

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Marriage is between a man and a woman (Bumper sticker, 2004)

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I walked through the Serengeti, a black panther at my side. Reincarnated in the body of a black Great Dane, he turned and held a man against the wall. The cutting thread of violence intermingled with benevolence.

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And when she stopped trembling, he was still holding on to her, shuddering and breathless and spent against her. She buried her face in his shoulder and thought about the day she’d had with him, and the laughter and the pleasure and the solid rightness of it all, and she felt so safe and satisfied and better that she held him tighter and when they were both calm again, she told him the truth: “I love you.”

His breath went out on a *whoosh*. After a very long time, he pulled away from her, and when he smiled down at her, he looked as if he were trying to

sell her a used car. . . . "Why are you in such a hurry? Three weeks and you're throwing commitment around." (Crusie, 2000, p. 308)

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Sex appears within hegemonic language as a *substance*, as, metaphysically speaking, a self-identical being. This appearance is achieved through a performative twist of language and/or discourse that conceals the fact that "being" a sex or a gender is fundamentally impossible. (Butler, 1999, p. 25)

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In the intersection of disciplinary power and bio-power, I am constituted as a modern body/subject. My "I" emerges as a shifting site. My subjectivity is individualized and generalized; my body is inscribed. I am intelligible through the myth of "sex."

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I live as the snake swallowing my own tail/tale. Consuming myself, I am so much more than I am while I disappear into my own mouth. A mouth formed of your words and deeds. A mouth spewing venom, words swallowed and vomited.

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