Songwriters, Independence, & Identity

Evan Naud

Arizona State University

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Mary-Ann McHugh

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Tōth is the solo music project of Brooklyn based Alex Toth. Having founded Rubblebucket with Kalmia Traver in 2007, the two shared a long term relationship for twelve years. Eventually the two separated personally, while professionally continuing to produce as Rubblebucket together. They released the single *Annihilation Song* on August 7, 2018, written by the two in the midst of breaking up. Toth began his personal project with the release of the single, *Copilot,* on September 14, 2018. His full album, *Practice Magic and Seek Professional Help When Necessary*, dropped later, on May 10, 2019. (via Spotify) The opening track of Toth's work, *Down for the Count*, is also a cover of *Annihilation Song*, performed solo by Toth this time, indicating his departure. Bearing Toth and Traver's history in mind, while analyzing Toth's individual perspective, via *Copilot,* is revealing. *Copilot* is a reflection on self-autonomy, and gender ideologies we possess while in a relationship, and how our views of them can change when they become dissolved through the pains of a breakup.

When it comes to autonomy, and specifically self-autonomy, the definition is somewhat overlooked, as it becomes less and less clear within the constructions of a relationship that inherently influence one's definition of self. In *Achieving Autonomy. Social Theory and Practice,* Piper opens with their idea, "...autonomy, in its most general formulation, refers to a property of self-government or self-determination … according to a self-conception that captures her authentic or true self…" (Piper, M., 2016, p.768) This brings into mind what constitutes one's authentic self, and more importantly where it comes from. The argument made by Piper is one that goes on to emphasize the importance of influences on the underlying core traits that we embark on actualizing through some form of "autonomous" action. In the case of *Copilot*, the

central theme of self-autonomy, or perhaps lack thereof, is imparted in the song's first verse, where Toth sings:

Don't not want to let you go

I let you go, I let you go

I guess there wasn't any other way

I thought you were my copilot

How will I ever run this ship

Without you by my side to navigate?

Here we're met with a man questioning the ability to live his own life in a self-reliant way. By claiming this helplessness, Toth runs against the grain of a standard male gender ideology. Being independent and resourceful on one's own may be an expectation of any grown man, but following a relationship of over a decade, Toth is seemingly rendered helpless.

Even when we make independent actions and decisions, the idea that we're fully autonomous in doing so is somewhat irrational. In *Rethinking Relational Autonomy*, Westlund proposes that we consider relationships to be a part of the equation, regardless of gender at all. Rather than focusing on autonomy as a separate concept and entity on its own to be practiced, Westlund claims individual choice and action should be prioritized on a case-by-case basis. (Westlund, A. C., 2009, p.27) Instead of relying on the tropes of being a man and having to do things on one's own, or being a woman and relying on others, there should be an emphasis on letting the individual determine, no matter their representation or current relationship situation. Westlund goes on to conclude that, "Autonomy as self-responsibility makes room for–and in fact demands–attention to caring relations in which the capacity for autonomy is developed and sustained." Westlund, A. C., 2009, p.42) In Toth's case, we can hear that he claims to have no

direction of life on his own, marking a significant departure from the farce that all men should be independent, self-sufficient go-getters we've been inundated with.

Another important piece of Toth's lyrics regards starting a family, and the inherent reliance on each other to do so. In the bridge he recalls the scene where his partner left him:

A memory of sunshine on a Massachusetts square

As I watch the idea of our child vanish in the air

I guess I was pretty clueless as you covered me with sand

Was this always your plan?

When it comes to having children, obviously the question of self-autonomous behavior is pointless to even enter the picture. Here, the notions of gender ideologies are more prominent, as Toth loses the opportunity altogether. Studies presented in *What is your couple type? Gender ideology, housework-sharing, and babies* go on to analyze the impact that perceived, and actualized equality, has in the decision-making process of having kids. Aassve, Fuochi, Mencarini, and Mendola link the importance of identifying with gender ideologies and whether or not they're put into practice, as essential to the formation of families, and which ones go on to have more children than others. Stating, "...not necessarily gender equality per se that matters for fertility: rather it is what he calls the gender equity and equality gap." (Aassve et al., 2015, p.10) When considering the gaps in one's ideology and the practice in a relationship itself, it becomes more understandable that general self-reliance and gender are not so linked as stereotypes may lead us to think. In the case of *Copilot,* Toth is rendered a task impossible to achieve through self-autonomy, which highlights this distinction for us.

Upon inspecting the lyrics and context of the relationship in *Copilot*, we may begin to rationalize that gender ideologies taught to us, explicitly or subliminally, may be irrelevant

altogether. *Copilot* helps us question the role self-identifying men may have in relationships and their assumed self-reliance to begin with, which leads us to understand that individual context is the most important aspect in any actualized gender role. Prince-Gibson and Schwartz explain this clearly in their work *Value Priorities and Gender.* What is presented to us as a given for each respective binary gender identity, is simply rather a preference of values, that may be realized or not, to varying degrees per individual. (Prince-Gibson, E., & Schwartz, S. H., 1998, p.50) Following this claim, they go back up their stereotype busting with anonymous surveys and findings. They regard the results here, "The central finding of this study is that we received no support for the integrated set of hypotheses we generated regarding gender differences in value priorities … This finding clearly contradicts theories of consistent gender difference." (Prince-Gibson, E., & Schwartz, S. H., 1998, p.62) Following the ideas put into practice, we can forgo the assumptions of women being more relational and thus reliant, and men being more independent and thus self-autonomous. In Toth's case, we are given a first-hand example of this in his relationship falling apart and thus his autonomy, in all aspects.

As not only a song, but a story, *Copilot* is a fine example of what it means to relate to others, whether in a relationship or not, and regarding gender identity, what it can mean to be a man. There are no hard and fast rules, and the idea of actually being self-autonomous, regardless of gender, is more unclear than first meets the eye. With these ideas in mind, analyzing Toth's work can better equip us to question the status-quo of gender ideologies. Going forward, we can make more informed decisions on how we identify and represent ourselves in our everyday lives.

References

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