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Charging the Force: Autotheory's Queer Virtue and the Plural Self in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*

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Abstract

Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015) is often lauded for popularizing autotheory, a hybrid practice of critical-creative writing that champions the perspective of author-as-subject. Autotheory-based works tend to resist the historical marginalization of diverse voices in both critical theory and the literary canon. As such, Nelson maintains that our conceptions of selfhood can benefit from being viewed as an ongoing process of negotiation between spectrums of sociocultural norms and inputs rather than an identity that can be definitively arrived at or resolved. This reading contends that Nelson's portrayal of the self eschews sociocultural expectations to offer a perspective on selfhood that is fluid and manifold. It will be argued that threads of queer tradition, embodiment, and motherhood function as essential vehicles for Nelson to negotiate an ever-pluralizing selfhood in her approach to autotheoretical practice. Nelson's tactful use of marginalia forms a multivocal network, serving as a form of pluralizing dialogue and expanding on queer literary kinship. Namely, she scrutinizes textual representations of the body and the acute consequences of representing bodies, including her own, that divert from patriarchal and heteronormative ideals. Additionally, Nelson's narrative charts alternate avenues of family-making and her physical pregnancy as they radically damage notions of a singular self. This analysis aims to shed light on the limitations, complexity, and progressive evolution of contemporary queer identity construction as it manifests in *The Argonauts*. This research explores the impact of embracing pluralized conceptions of selfhood in writing, contributing to a deeper understanding of the interplay between queer personal narratives and broader sociocultural norms.

Keywords: autobiography studies, contemporary literature, feminist studies, queer studies

Introduction: The Scope of Autotheory

In June of last year, I encountered a newspaper on the sidewalk while making my way home from work. Still rolled in its plastic sleeve, I skimmed the banner headline, “ROE V. WADE OVERTURNED.” I paused to take a picture on my phone as I stepped over the paper and continued towards home, but its headline lingered in my mind. The newspaper felt deeply entangled with my assigned female at birth status. While I had not yet participated in the stir of online discourse surrounding Roe’s overturning, the news had broken forty-eight hours prior. I had been silent in its wake. A shame to my sex, I was! My body felt no longer my own (and not in the way gestation may change this sense) even if I could take to the streets about it. Was I destined to tack this newspaper photo onto my social media story as a twenty-four-hour glimmer of ideology? Or was this encounter a call to refrain from online prophesying, politicizing, professing, or projecting to the social media echo chamber? My walk home was then both a physical trek and a decision of ideological alignment. Whether I decided to post the photograph or not, the acts of writing, theorizing, and asserting presence persevere. Although my anecdote here provides little innovation in either storytelling or criticism, it does represent a microcosm of several features linked to the emerging practice of autotheory.

Autotheory is defined more as a hybrid manner of practice than as a literary genre. It blends elements of critical and creative writing to champion an author-as-subject perspective.¹ Contemporary examples emerge from lineages of autobiographical writing and critical theory. In each ancestral thread, authors other than cisgender, heterosexual white men have been disproportionately subject to critique and dismissal.² Moreover, attention to its ancestral peripheral standing signifies a possibility for autotheoretical practices to resist, respond, and counter the critique that critical theory is trapped in an academic consciousness, divorced from the “real” and vivid sensations of physical form. In conflating the theoretical with the alive, personal, fleshy, political, intimate, and “true,” autotheory attempts to subvert oppression from hegemonic power.

Since its publication in 2015, Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* has garnered a popular readership and extolled critical acclaim and fascination as a treatise in autotheory. *The Argonauts* traces Nelson’s relationship with her husband, the fluidly gendered artist Harry Dodge, Nelson’s pregnancy, and the birth of their son, Iggy. Its non-linear plot is fused with contemplation on the roles of art, philosophy, and critical theory in everyday life, conducting the text as literary wayfinding. By negotiating shifting spectrums—from assimilation to revolution and from normative to queer—these negotiations constitute a life. *The Argonauts* asserts selfhood as an ongoing negotiation rather than a matter of resolution. It will be contended that Nelson’s autotheoretical practice employs queer tradition, embodiment, and motherhood as vehicles to disavow the presumption of selfhood as a singularity. Vessels for

¹ For a more comprehensive picture of autotheory’s lineage and challenges in articulating the variable nature and incongruence of autotheory’s aesthetic and theoretical dimensions, see Wiegman.

² For evidence of the marginalization of other identities autobiographical writing and advancements in critical theory, see Cucinella 19, Sykes 151-160, and Lensink 39-53.

symbolic structure like marginalia, dialogic negotiation, and multiple authorial viewpoints carry forward this ideology. When we can view the self not as an individual, but as part of the great collective, we find that the connection and support we seek out is embedded within and extends to the communities we inhabit. Ultimately, this analysis asserts that human conceptions of self, namely, the queer self, engage in a dynamic interplay of pluralizing forces evident in Nelson's lyrical discourse and the "great soup of being in which we actually live" (53). This perspective in reading literature comes as a timely reminder in a climate that villainizes and punishes "otherness" that unification walks in different forms and that a unified self is made of many selves.

For or By Another: Writing the Relative Self

Selfhood in *The Argonauts* refuses singularity. Nelson builds an intertextual structure that relates the manifold voices of her subversive and often queer forebears to negotiate pluralizing the authorial voice. According to *The New Yorker*, Hilton Als reports on Nelson's acceptance speech for the National Book Critics Circle Award when she acknowledges that the book "stands on the shoulders of . . . the wild revolutionary work of so many feminist, queer, and anti-racist thinkers, writers, activists, and artists" (Nelson, qtd. in Als). In *The Argonauts*, Nelson describes these great heroes of her world as "the many-gendered mothers of [her] heart," a phrase adopted from the poet Dana Ward (57).³ The title, *The Argonauts*, is perhaps the book's most obvious presentation of its multivocal framework. Hailing from *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes on the renewal of love, the mythological vessel, the Argo, is rebuilt in parts during its voyage but not renamed (Nelson 5).⁴

Nelson renews the work of so many revolutionaries by shepherding their voices into the text in manifold ways. Abundantly referenced are those whose works predate Nelson's such as Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and D.W. Winnicott. By pluralizing the authorial voice with their inclusions, it evokes an illusory intimacy. Nelson assumes a degree of closeness with her forebears, though the framework validates its mode of intertextual familiarity through equal regard of Nelson's contemporaries, whom she often regards as personally close. Authors such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Eileen Myles, and even Nelson's husband, Harry, appear soggy-sandwiched in and around Nelson's musings.⁵ They are occasionally referenced by name in the central body of text but are more often cited in the marginalia of *The Argonauts* without a specific citation. It is often unclear where the work of her forebears ends and Nelson's voice begins. While this multivocal framework appears to imbue Nelson with non-sovereign credibility, it is important to keep in mind that Nelson

³ I have encountered "many gendered mothers" with various hyphen placements by Nelson and other scholars. I will omit them as the hyphen's placement fluctuates the phrase's meaning. In one sense, "many-gendered" expands the possibilities of maternal genders, while "gendered-mothers" speaks to presumptuous gendering of the mother figure. I invite readers to read this phrase as they see fit in the contextual accounts of Nelson's narrative that aim to subvert hegemonic expectations of gender and motherhood.

⁴ See Pugh for a thorough account of Barthes' surprising centrality to Nelson's text and an alternate framework for bridging theory and autobiographical narrative.

remains the sole curator of *The Argonauts'* dialogue. She interpolates the voices of her forebears where she sees fit to further her ontological negotiation.

When we discuss the queer virtue and self-pluralization of *The Argonauts'* intertextual structure, we should also consider the privileged perspective of its author. As a well-educated, white, and thin creator, Nelson benefits from structures that privilege these identities. As Ralph Clare alludes, Nelson “has the luxury to dismiss” (100) a host of theorists whom she describes as “yet another great white man pontificating from the podium” (54). This luxury enables Nelson to flag the “voices that pass for radicality in our times” and conclude that we should “leave them to their love, their event proper” (79). Nelson’s relative position of privilege allows her to compositionally negotiate a metaphysics of selfhood and queerness with far greater freedom and frankness than what a plethora of forebears in Nelson’s queer lineage faced or what her contemporaries with less sociocultural capital could face.

Moreover, we must bear in mind the privilege that Nelson now lives and writes in which is a vastly changed political climate that many of her predecessors were denied. Just over a month after *The Argonauts'* publication, the ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015 effectively legalized and recognized same-sex marriages in all fifty U.S. states. In reading *The Argonauts* as an expansion of dialogue on the plurality of selfhood, it is pertinent to recognize the existing body of critical work on this book as it emerges from a radically changed climate toward allowing queer visibility in the mainstream. When Nelson confesses that her interest lies “in offering up [her] experience and performing [her] particular manner of thinking, for whatever they are worth” (97), she subverts the proclivity of “highbrow” texts to desire a singular, ontological conclusion to define queerness and selfhood. Cognizant of her privilege, Nelson unassumingly locates the majority of her reference points in the text’s marginalia in a move that provides access to a popular readership and dilutes the boundaries of the singular self.

Nelson’s prolific use of marginalia as a dialogic aid formally evokes selfhood as an always relational, pluralized entity in literary texts. When reflecting on her undergraduate thesis (anecdotes of her time devoted to literary scholarship are abundant throughout the text), Nelson suggests that performance and intimacy are metonymies for “writing that dramatizes the ways in which we are for another or by virtue of another” (60), citing feminist philosopher Judith Butler in the margins. Nelson conflates the intimacy of a performative persona with the self. Referring to Butler in the margins extends the physical boundaries of Nelson’s composition, interpolating the works of her forebears which extends her autotheoretical practice to regard the self as more than one. As in this instance, Nelson’s marginal citations are sometimes the only indication of a differentiation between Nelson’s words and others in her multivocal network. Though it is unclear where Nelson’s convictions end and Butler’s influence begins, Prudence Bussey-Chamberlain’s assertion is maintained that *The Argonauts'* marginal citations are not simply an “afterthought” to subdue a criticism of appropriation but “always existing on the edge like a form of conversation” (141).

Nelson alludes to the plural self as she likens conversation to a form of pluralized partnership and ontological negotiation. Nelson likewise mandates a need to “tolerate an instance beyond the Two, precisely at the moment of attempting to represent a partnership—a

nuptial even" (7). Her passage follows with an italicized fragment that cites Deleuze and Claire Parnet in its marginalia. Nelson, or Nelson/Deleuze/Parnet, writes how "[nuptials] are no longer binary machines...This could be what a conversation is—simply the outline of a becoming" (7). *The Argonauts* asserts that the virtue of writing a selfhood is an invitation to wade through referential and relational dialogues. After all, Nelson is not "married" to any one narrative or theoretical thread in the text—she is married to Harry! As selfhood can be viewed as a form of dialogic negotiation, so too can it be seen as a contribution to the self-reflexive impulse in Nelson's writing which celebrates queer and marginalized existences.

To better understand the revelatory potential of Nelson's engagement with queer tradition as a vehicle for the self's identity as a cornucopia-esque multiplex, we can turn to Rachel Sykes' investigation of the dual connotations of women's confessional writing. She writes, "[t]aken as an affirmative, oversharing means to master a participatory feeling: it is an almost transcendent act of performance, enjoyment, or suffering shared with others" (153). Nelson evokes a plural selfhood through her confessional performance of intertextuality. However, where Sykes posits "oversharing can also be understood as an act of self-immolation in which sharers cut themselves into parts and distribute these pieces as grants or gifts to others" (153), I argue that it is precisely Nelson's writing "for another" that subverts self-immolation or marginalization.

Nelson rejects the connotation of confessional writing to denote "too much" sharing and to be self-destructive in nature. Where the autotheorist could be considered a "sharer," she is just as much a "taker" and even more so a recycler. She considers the pleasure of her autotheoretical practice as "recognizing that one may have to... write the same notes in the margin, return to the same themes in one's work, relearn the same emotional truths, write the same book over and over again— not because one is stupid or obstinate or incapable of change, but because such revisitations constitute a life" (112). She maintains a conviction that the force of dependency holds an impulse for an ontological understanding of the self as beyond "me" or "I." *The Argonauts'* marginalia is indebted to the work of the many gendered mothers of Nelson's heart and committed to proffering a new form of textual life to historically marginalized works through such inclusions. Nelson conflates selfhood with plural performance and writing that proudly negotiates with its queer ancestry. As the textual "body" of *The Argonauts* builds upon the queer tradition it attempts to breathe the raw, exacting physicality of life into queerness and text while it considers concessions to (re)produce intellectually and creatively from a marginalized body.

Where Text Fails: Interrogating the Gap

In reading embodiment as a vehicle that pluralizes selfhood, it is beneficial to consider how difficult it is for either the body or its representations to ever tell the whole truth of "us." Bound to the intimacy of plural performance, Nelson's negotiation of selfhood mingles with Ralph Clare's argument that the representative self in autotheoretical works "paradoxically gestures to something real and experienced" (97). She considers the aporia of a gap existing

between the immediate sensations experienced in our bodies and our limited capacity to articulate them in text. In other words, the limited capacity of art to represent life is analogous to the body's limited capacity to express the self in singular terms. That limitation becomes acute in the case of marginalized bodies. It is asserted that where Nelson examines the limitations of language to represent marginalized bodies, she questions the looming inevitability that representations will fail to capture reality. To reject selfhood as a physical singularity, Nelson intimately renders her relationship with Harry, who both occupies a marginalized and is someone she "want[s] so close the third person never need apply" (7). Just as 20th century British author Virginia Woolf's character Orlando, who begins the story as a man and one day wakes in a woman's body, would "Ransack the language as he might, words failed him" (23). *The Argonauts* admits that as manifold and pluralized as we appear to be, are, or can become, any attempt to represent corporeal sensations will fall short; to put forth our representation despite this admission is surely an attempt of virtuous performance.

If the essence of selfhood transcends containment to a singular body, then its most effective textual representations begin with acknowledging gender identity as fluid and assumes corporeal marginalization to be a shared experience. Catherine Cucinella argues an essentialist view of gendering the body "refuse[s] the specificity of women...and on some level, marginalize[s] creative and intellectual works by women" (13). In moving beyond a male/female binary, Nelson parallels Cucinella's argument to refuse an essentialist view of gendering the body. She conveys that the marginalized position of her body is shared, though "whatever sameness [she is] noted in [her] relationships with women is not the sameness of Woman, and certainly not the sameness of parts. Rather, it is the shared, crushing understanding of what it means to live in a patriarchy" (25). Thus, in articulating the plural self, a fluid understanding of shared marginal position rather than anatomical similarity "reminds us that there is difference right where we may be looking for, and expecting, communion" (Nelson 93). In the text she writes on Sedgwick's desire for "queer" to "designate molten or shifting parts, a means of asserting while also giving the slip" (Nelson 29). Yet where Nelson extrapolates the power of a reclaimed term "insist[s] on retaining a sense of the fugitive" (29), not even a shared position of marginalization can reconcile where language fails to represent the body fully and accurately.

When Nelson shares an initial draft of *The Argonauts* with Harry, he expresses feeling "unbeheld" (46) by her representation of him, speaking to the disconnect between his lived experience and Nelson's textual representation of him. While Nelson is distraught by Harry's "terrible feeling," uncertainty deters her empathy as wayfinding around this looming paradox is bound to her "inner defense attorney" (46). She asks: "How can a book be both a free expression and a negotiation? Is it not idle to fault a net for having holes?" (Nelson 46). Here, she alludes to the fact that representation, of course, can never tell the whole truth, but what a loss it would be to discount the great attempts we make with words. Similarly, when Harry begins testosterone, referred to as "T" in the text, Nelson is fraught with fear for the health of Harry's changing body in the wake of her support. On the subject, she wonders "if prose is but the gravestone marking the forsaking of wildness (fidelity to sense-making, to assertion, to

argument, however loose)” (52). Therefore, she is “no longer sure” whether she or Harry is “more at home in the world [or] free” (52). Harry’s metamorphosis (fueled by T) towards the conventional, passing as a cisgender man, complicates Nelson’s articulation of freedom, just as the act facilitates a moment of queer self-realization for Harry. Thus, *The Argonauts* reveals limitations in representing “other” bodies in literature; the use of representations is wholly dependent on its user and who it is using. As writers, we cannot always get it right, or will not, even as we try. Once again, Nelson turns to the work of Judith Butler to discuss the freedoms and constraints of living in a gendered, marginalized body. Citing Butler in the margins, Nelson proposes a need for performativity to resignify gender norms and “work the trap that one is inevitably in” (15). The aim of linking the self to the body and writing about it in all of its failure is not how to solve this principal aporia. Rather, it is how to position the marginalized body as a force in creating representational space for revelations that pluralize the self.

Nelson cannot negotiate this paradox to resolution, but she argues that even while representation can never be good enough, it can and should attempt to do so. On the 20th century American writer Gertrude Stein’s refusal to label her queer relationship as such, Nelson proposes it to be “a little romantic—the romance of letting an individual experience of desire take precedence over a categorical one” (9). She applies this notion of romance to her autotheoretical practice, implying that the particular and fluid experiences of love can construct a manner of unbinding (embodiment) from categorization (representation). Nelson takes on a form of direct address—the book is “for Harry,” the dedication page reads. She writes about their courtship, from sex details to arguments on whether Wittgenstein had the right idea when he argued words can transcend nomination and whether they can ever be good enough. She recalls their marriage ceremony in 2008 by a drag queen just before California ballot Proposition 8 passed in California, a state constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage until it was ruled unconstitutional several years later (HUSL Library). Furthermore, she chronicles and compares bodily transformations of hormone replacement therapy and artificial insemination. No intimate details escaped the pen in the textual representation of Nelson and Harry’s relationship. In doing so, “the messy shit stays messy” (53); attempting an authentic portrayal of embodiment produces a narrative of queer self-realization. Nelson writes of feeling “lucky enough to feel real” and attributing to Sarah Ahmed in the page’s marginalia “that the moment of queer pride is a refusal to be shamed by witnessing the other as being ashamed of you” (18). Overall, Nelson’s work answers to and resists the ideological structures that have positioned Nelson and Harry’s physical bodies and their works as peripheral and transgressive.

Here in Nelson’s negotiation, life resists decomposition in the wake of oppressive structures that call for the erasure of her personhood as woman, artist, and intellectual, marginalizing the “happy ending” she presents in a story of queer love and kinship. Nelson describes a moment where Harry shows her an essay that remains uncredited on butches and femmes—polarizing labels to some people and confirming to others in the queer community. Nelson fixated on a line reading, “to be femme is to give honor where there has been shame” (31), suggesting that a queer embrace of femininity begets a further removal from the hegemonic power of cisgender men. Nelson responds to the essay, declaring to “still behold in

anger and agony the eagerness of the world to throw piles of shit on those of us who want to savage or simply cannot help but savaging the norms that so desperately need savaging” (32). The expression of marginalized bodies, such as Nelson's attempts to portray hers and Harry's in *The Argonauts*, are a revelation synonymous with the pleasure of insistence, for there is no apparent structure at work that imbues these people nor their work with hegemonic or implicit power. The text's performance of writing is built on a foundation from Nelson's perspective as a dubiously “straight” woman and her reliance on Harry as partner, lover, muse, equal and fluidly-gendered person. This can then be viewed as a reification of theoretical disturbance and physical affront, a revelation of love in writing from the margins. The poetic body of Nelson's work becomes a tribute to love amassed by unapologetically embracing the pluralized queer self.

Barefoot on The Argo

Is it not easier to navel-gaze when the abdomen swells with purpose? The titular Argo returns to alter Nelson's conception of selfhood; she renews the notion of a plural self as a form of Argo-logic. While pregnant, she discards any ultrasound photos of her son Iggy's in-utero genitalia. For the time being, she declares that she will “[l]et him stay oblivious...to the task of performing a self for others, to the fact that we develop, even in utero, in response to a flow of projections and reflections ricocheting off of us. Eventually, we call that snowball a self (Argo)” (Nelson 94-95). As the “many gendered mothers” of her heart complicate notions of a singular selfhood, so does becoming a mother in her own right. Accordingly, pregnancy becomes a renewal of selfhood for Nelson and is the beginning of selfhood for Iggy. Even as she remains “Nelson,” she is shifting and molten. *The Argonauts* chronicles non-normative avenues for family-making, and above all, how pregnancy radically queers the body and transforms one's creative and intellectual work.

Pregnancy becomes vital and productive to Nelson's autotheoretical pursuit in composing *The Argonauts*. Iris Marion Young's seminal feminist social theory asserts that the pregnant body does not hinder the pursuit of “project” and that pregnancy as an aesthetic interest “does not divert” from occupation. Instead, it is a temporal grounding, “not as an object, but as... in movement” (Young 165). So too does Nelson articulate pregnancy as she “estimate[s] that about nine-tenths of the words in th[e] book were written ‘free,’ the other one-tenth, hooked up to a hospital-grade breast pump: words piled into one machine, milk siphoned out by another” (100). While pregnant, her changing physical form provides her with a subject to explore a slipperiness between mother and selfhood in an autotheoretical practice of writing. As a woman and pregnant “subject,” she is therefore susceptible to a diminished standing in her endeavors.

Expectant mothers are praised in traditional society but often reduced to vessels, overlooking their feelings and undervaluing their intellectual autonomy; pregnancy expedites the marginalization of the already marginalized. Thus, Nelson was not exempt from this dual standard. She recalls giving a talk on thematically dark content where she felt like a “pregnant

cutout doll” (90). In the question and answer section, a man couldn’t “help but notice that [Nelson is] with child” and wondered how she could have handled working on such dark material in her “condition?” (91). Nelson retorted, “[l]eave it to the old patrician white guy to call the speaker back to her body, so that no one misses the spectacle of that wild oxymoron, the pregnant woman who thinks...a pumped up version of... a woman who thinks” (91). The pregnant subject retains the entrapping notion of their prepregnant body yet has no option but to move in the pregnant (Young 164). While Nelson never releases her intellectual and creative pursuits, pursuing pregnancy subjects her to a new form of marginalization as she experiences a shifting bodily standard in which the body becomes a liminal more than one.

Pregnancy thwarts the “normal” bodily state and tangibly disrupts the notion of a singular selfhood. Nelson asserts the culmination of pregnancy as the resulting occupation of motherhood is an undertaking “for another.” Nevertheless, it is brought to light that pregnancy is a concession inviting change to the body and psyche, diffusing into a further pluralization of selfhood. Nelson notes “[t]he way a baby literally makes space where there wasn’t space before” (103). In this sense, pregnancy is a revolution of the body’s form and a vehicle for queer revelation as Nelson and Harry conceive their son through alternative family-making methods (77). The baby is a force for pluralization, as it requires the mother to relinquish her body to the baby, though Nelson believes “[t]he baby’s body is still a revelation” (42). Nelson cries, “A body! An actual body!” (42) in joy and surprise in the early days after her son’s birth.

Pregnancy welcomes the disruption of selfhood as a uniquely individual realization or independent being. Nelson supposes, “the cheery way of looking at this snowball [we call a self] would be to say, subjectivity is keenly relational, and it is strange” (95). Nelson finds subjectivity’s relation to kinship as essential to embrace the propensity for selfhood to morph in a queer fashion as the body of the pregnant subject becomes different and more than one. On regaining an individuality of her body, Nelson writes how “[She is] not sure [she] want[s] it back, or in what sense [she] could ever have it” (109). Nelson also notes that “[Sedgwick] spent a lot of time talking and writing about that which is more than one, and more than two, but less than infinity” (62). And pregnancy is just that, a fluid and indeterminate approximation of self so translucent and queer they have decided to govern it, lest it transgresses the power of the white man. The shift from tentative individual to pregnant subject and finally to mother and baby conveys the multidimensionality integral to Nelson’s realization of a plural self in producing an honest as possible representation in text. In sum, we find that pregnancy tugs at the threads of personhood in queer fashion to be mutable and multiple.

Conclusion: “the difference is spreading”

The Argonauts’ existence as a published and wildly successful work validates Nelson’s realization in a less constrained paradigm than where the “disruptive” thinkers of the late twentieth century performed. Nelson’s complex framework of kinship transposes the self, inviting us as readers to fill in the many gaps Nelson has interrogated in the book. Alexandra Pugh reports “[t]he typographical gaps in *The Argonauts* also allow for the possibility that

Nelson's readers might add marginalia to her text in turn. Nelson makes space for the reader in the gaps between and around her fragments; in occupying this space, the reader might generate a further "scene of family-making," an addendum to Nelson's literary lineage" (558). Nelson supports this possibility in expanding the gendered connotations of family making to reflect a fluid experience. Nelson writes, "[o]ne of the gifts of genderqueer family making...is the revelation of caretaking as detachable from—and attachable to—any gender, any sentient being" (72).

Embodying a queer self no longer becomes a question of asserting one's radical difference but inviting a diverse warmth to all manners of becoming. Queerness becomes more than one "self" or one body. As she examines inclusivity in the queer community, Nelson wonders "whatever happened to the difference is spreading?" (63). *The Argonauts* maintains no fixed framework for living a "true" or veritably "queer" existence. In a 2022 guest lecture at Brown University, Nelson declared "There's always a dance between self and others. It's not like you obliterate the self when you begin to navigate being in communion...most of life is spent in a negotiation." *The Argonauts* is Nelson's urge for textual representations to attempt radical authenticity and to ask us, in turn, to practice radical empathy—from the margins into life.

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