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Radical Exposures: Crip and Queer in Maggie Nelson's Autotheory

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In a culture that damns outliers as oversharers, Maggie Nelson uses her memoirs *Bluets* (2017) and *The Argonauts* (2015), to offer a radical performance of self-exposure. Through disclosures on care, she confronts readers with crip and queer identities to challenge their otherness in a society that prioritizes heteronormativity and able-bodiedness, silencing the 'Other.' She brings these subjects to the fore of public discourse through co-construction. This is a collaborative practice of including secondary references, biography, and theory in first-person accounts, inimitably supported by her memoir form 'autotheory.' Featuring an abundance of voices from high and low culture and Nelson's inner circle enhances the quality of self-exposure in her work and shows how polyvocality counters the ordinary silencing of marginalized voices. This article offers a literary analysis of Nelson's life writing to make a case for self-exposure. It lays out the contemporary context of her work and examines feminist, crip and queer practice through physical care and family making.



The North American life-writer, poet and academic Maggie Nelson is a proponent of self-exposure. She states that she is 'clearly ... not a private person' and holds a deep 'interest in the personal made public,' littering her work with quotidian detail and intimate insights (2017: 78; 2015a: 60). She acknowledges that her public revelations elicit 'repulsion' (2015a: 60). The divulging of personal information 'connected to a certain discourse of the private, that is, discourses of the home, domesticity, reproduction, or intimacy' is often deemed inappropriate and dismissively labelled 'oversharing' (Hoffman 2009: 64). However, I argue that Nelson embraces this self-exposure by presenting her experiences of performing and receiving care in *Bluets* (2017) and *The Argonauts* (2015). In response to 'repulsion,' she asserts that she is 'ashamed, but undaunted' (2015a: 60). In her telling, these ordinarily dismissed topics are used as familiar touchpoints of life through which to present crip and queer identities in ways that challenge their otherness in a society that prioritizes heteronormativity and able-bodiedness, silencing the 'Other.' Crip is an identity category and body of thought that recognizes how, much like queer persons, disabled subjects are rendered abnormal within mainstream society (McRuer 2006). Although Nelson's work has received much critical attention for its queer elements, there has been no examination of her work in terms of its intimate link with crip. These dual concerns are imperative when considering the texts' form and content, and power as an antidote to othering.

Nelson brings these subjects to the fore of public discourse through co-construction, a practice of including secondary references, biography, and theory in first-person accounts. Co-construction is inimitably supported by the text's autotheoretical form, which blends autobiography with theory. Featuring an abundance of voices from high and low culture and Nelson's inner circle enhances the quality of self-exposure in her work whilst validating her insights in a society that dismisses crip and queer identities, as well as exposure itself. Focusing on co-construction allows my exploration of Nelson's texts to go beyond the oft cited 'theoretical' elements to provide a holistic approach to her sources and their effectiveness in supporting underrepresented experience.

Nelson's work and *Bluets* and *The Argonauts*, in particular, are undoubtedly crip and queer in form and content. She has produced three academic texts of cultural criticism, three books of poetry, two texts charting her aunt's murder and the subsequent trial, and two autotheoretical texts, *Bluets* and *The Argonauts*. *Bluets* is formed of 240 short prose poetry 'propositions.' It details the profound grief following Nelson's breakup with the unnamed 'prince of blue,' caring for her injured friend following an accident, and musings on the color blue (2017: 36). *The Argonauts* is written in short sections of continuous prose. It offers a narrative about Nelson's pregnancy and

family making with her genderqueer partner Harry Dodge. She describes herself as queer, outside of heterosexuality and focuses on non-normative gender and sexuality in her works. She can also be defined as someone who writes 'queerly,' as her work encapsulates the secondary definition of queer by being 'unconventional' ("Queer," 2021). Nelson utilizes unusual fragmentary, non-linear forms that are frequently cited as 'genre-bending' (Wiegman 2020: 1). The two definitions reveal queer's links to crip theory, which similarly reads disability as societally constructed as outside of normativity (McRuer 2006), and further, the practice of disability life writing taking on unconventional forms. This relation resounds in Nelson's work as she exposes the crip and queer experience of herself and others and pushes the boundaries of existing form to suit stigmatized identities.

Autotheory, feminism and marginalized lives

Autotheory is an apt genre for offering insight into marginalized lives. The term possesses the loose definition of 'engaging with theory—as a discourse, frame, or mode of thinking and practice—alongside lived experience and subjective embodiment;' in short, blending theory with the autobiographical (Fournier 2021: 18). Autotheory links closely with the more widely researched 'memoir,' which can be seen as an umbrella term within life writing under which autotheory, with its distinctively theoretical engagement, sits. Outside of conveying lives, the most notable link between autotheory and memoir pertains to the forms as more democratic than the tradition of 'autobiography,' which has historically been viewed as the preserve of powerful white, heterosexual, cis-gendered men. Autotheory can be applied to literature and writing of all kinds, visual art, and performance, merely possessing the loose norms that Lauren Fournier describes. The breadth of the term means it often refers to disparate aesthetics and works. Fewer rules make it ripe for appropriation and experimentation, particularly by marginalized writers who may not be able or wish to represent their experience in conventional forms. Authors including Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Nancy Mairs and Alice Wong can be viewed as part of a crip tradition of autotheory. The form links well with the autoethnographic methods prevalent in the crip movement, which combine political activism with lived experience. Further, as David Bolt (2014) describes, an importance is placed on the 'experiential knowledge' of disability in crip studies, blurring 'auto' and 'theory' by emphasizing lived experience as a knowledge base outside of traditional, often medical forms (1).

Robyn Wiegman (2020) also draws attention to autotheory's relations to queer and transgender studies, noting they both 'rupture the normativities safeguarded by

traditional conventions drawn around genre and disciplinarity alike' (7). Autotheory rose to prominence when coined by queer writer and philosopher Paul B. Preciado to describe his innovative memoir *Testo Junkie* (2008). The text charts his experiences taking testosterone alongside a history of gender and pharmaceuticals. Nelson attributes her use of the term autotheory to Preciado, and she describes his text as 'amazing,' feeling a 'tremendous kinship' with the writing because of the ways it, like her own texts, 'exceeds the boundaries of the "personal"' (2015b).

Nelson's use of autotheory follows a lineage of feminist practice. Although the term appears relatively new, the form has a much longer history. As Fournier (2021) asserts, 'the history of feminism is, in a sense, a history of autotheory—one that actively seeks to bridge theory and practice' (18). Second-wave feminism sought to revive and re-evaluate women's life writing as a form of consciousness-raising, reprinting earlier women's texts, publishing new ones and developing a pedagogy that took these works as serious objects of study (Riley and Pearce 2018: 162). A key motivation was the mantra that 'the personal is political.' This phrase signifies a turn away from the entrenched belief that 'genuine scholarship was objective and neutral' and instead analyzed the ways 'so-called trivial aspects of personal life reflect the fundamental relations of power' (Rothenberg 2008: 69). The shift led to feminist texts which sought to bring together autobiography and theory, allowing personal experience to inform and be informed by political and philosophical perspectives (Fournier 2018: 644). Black feminists, in particular, pioneered this kind of writing. Audre Lorde and Toni Morrison, for instance, frequently combined first-person experience and theory in texts including *The Cancer Journals* (1980) (Gumbs 2016: 22). Notably, Nelson's work provides a crucial example of continuing these feminist traditions which marry other marginalized perspectives. Life writing thrived in the subsequent third- and now fourth-wave of the movement. The circulation of broader outlooks on gender through theorists like Judith Butler during this time led to an increased turn in these texts towards an interrogation of gender, apposite for queer writing and beyond (Riley and Pearce 2018: 175).

Nelson has been critiqued for her lack of acknowledgement of the Black origins of autotheory, which is also apparent in whom she features in her texts. So Mayer (2018) states that there is 'almost complete absence – in fact, persistent erasure – of people of color in *The Argonauts* either as lived beings or through Nelson's citational practice' (190). This statement is also applicable to *Bluets*. Undoubtedly, this is a criticism that can be made of feminism and disability studies more widely. In this article, I attempt to counter Nelson's citational shortfall by utilizing some of the wealth of works by disabled and queer writers of color to inform my analysis.

Self-exposure and collaborative evidence

Nelson's texts build upon a tradition of marginalized people's life writing and self-exposure. Self-exposure is a long-standing method for confronting constraints on women. Kaye Mitchell (2018) notes it as a feature across diverse works, including Nelson's, as well as the writing of Kathy Acker and the visual and performance art of Hannah Wilke and Marina Abramovic (196-7). Jennifer Cooke's (2020) recent coining of 'the new audacity' contemporary life writing movement, in which she cites Nelson, is also attendant to exposure as a continuing feminist method for demanding political change. Self-exposure has also been used fruitfully by disabled artists, for instance, the radical S&M performances of Bob Flanagan (McRuer 2006: 182-3). Furthermore, embracing exposure through a perceived excess of detail or private subject matter has been explored as a literary mode. Rachel Sykes (2017) describes oversharing as a feminist poetics, and Kate Zambreno (2010) and Dodie Bellamy (2008) reference a similar style as 'Bulimic Writing' and 'The Barf,' respectively. These forms foreground the personal to act as a resistance against women's historic restriction by set boundaries, control, and quietness (Milks 2017: 89). Additionally, Zambreno and Bellamy's theorizations are particularly anti-ableist by centralizing the concept of sickness on display as a political act in ways that circumvent the common pathologization of sharing (Milks: 93).

A key element of self-exposure Nelson employs is found in her use of theory itself. Nelson's quantity and range of sources enhance her work's sense of self-exposure by offering a comprehensive view of her influences. She builds on the feminist tradition of combining the personal and political, and populates her work with many voices in a way that counteracts enduring 'silencing.' This is in keeping with the 'significant contribution' feminist and, I would add, disability life writing has made in 'moving the critical spotlight away from the lone male creator' towards more collective writing practices (James and North 2018: 2). Nelson capitalizes on the elasticity of autotheory in *Bluets* and *The Argonauts* by featuring academic and popular cultural sources in the form of quotations and references. They show her in conversation with and thinking through other women, queer and disabled people.

Nelson's personal and theoretical inclusions are a form of co-construction. I define co-construction as a bricolage technique which broadens intertextuality to incorporate theory, multimedia, secondary references, and the lived experiences of others within life writing, a practice that has received limited attention. The definition provides an umbrella for the gestural and collage narrative techniques referred to by Group Mu, who describe double meaning through referential origin and additional use (Fracina and Perloff 2014). It also builds upon Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2014) who use

‘co-construction’ to denote the ways bloggers present their experiences through links to ‘significant others ... causes, and affiliations’ (71). The term has been applied to older forms of life writing too, including by Lynn M. Linder (2016), in a discussion of 19th Century texts where the word is used interchangeably with ‘collaborative,’ whether there are additional ‘active participants’ in the writing or not. The ‘co-’ in co-construction undoubtedly indicates an element of collaboration and a set of intentions in citation policy that offers corroboration for a particular lived experience. Terms of address add a second dimension. For instance, contemporary poet and autotheorist Claudia Rankine notably uses the second person pro-nouns ‘you’ and ‘we’ in her life writing, which reinscribes her personal circumstance onto the reader and so formulates them as active participants or empathetic allies. Nelson’s work utilizes the same technique. In *The Argonauts*, Nelson addresses Harry as ‘you’ throughout, a ‘you’ that is secondarily transposed onto the reader as the ‘co-’. These methods, alongside the connotations of ‘construction’ are useful for considering deliberate acts of identity building from marginalized writers like Nelson.

Nelson’s use of co-construction circumvents issues of appropriation. Appropriation is a common criticism of life writing that relies heavily on the biographies of others as a form of support or justification for a person’s story. For instance, in a discussion of Chris Kraus’ *Aliens & Anorexia* (2000), Mitchell (2020) questions Kraus’ mode of incorporating Simone Weil’s life story within hers, which she claims: ‘threatens to subsume Weil’s story, to obliterate the otherness of the other’ (216). This is a valid concern, seemingly applicable to Nelson who appears to be a cisgender, able-bodied woman representing a number of queer and crip concerns. However, many of the key biographies Nelson features in *Bluets* and *The Argonauts* are done so with permission and participation. In *The Argonauts*, her partner Harry is even described as taking a ‘mechanical pencil’ to the original draft and suggesting ways Nelson could ‘facet [her] representation of him’ (46).

Regardless of consultation, the representation of both Nelson’s inner circle and the many theorists and creatives outside actually act to reconcile a key issue between waves of feminism. Second-wave feminism has been noted as problematically homogenizing, while writing of the third-wave has been critiqued for individualism and lack of political rigor. Co-construction allows Nelson to create a fully referenced collective in support of her political aims without the erasure that comes with omitting individual stories. To write purely as an individual would also present issues for the queer and crip. For instance, as Susannah Mintz (2007) states in reference to marginalized, and particularly disabled, writers, upholding individualism via traditional forms of autobiography runs the risk of ‘perpetuating another problematic fiction, that disability is a purely personal

and physical, rather than social and political, problem' (7-8). Featuring numerous voices within life writing creates connections within a group whilst emphasizing the interlinked nature of a society that casts particular groups as Other. Secondary references make Nelson's life recognizable by adding detail from validating sources that place her individual experience in a wider political framework as she pushes the boundaries of suitable topics and writing subjects. Simultaneously, although there are notable omissions, it begins to flatten hierarchies of importance to draw othered identities from the margins and replicate their communities.

Reception and cybercultures

Despite Nelson's work being undoubtedly radical in form and content, she combines this with accessible topics such as family-making, which are anchored in mainstream society. This made her later works particularly effective in their reach and popular with reviewers. Her early writing initially gained little traction and remained within indie publishing circles and readership, but her later work received unprecedented recognition. Despite sharing personal experience already noted as eliciting 'repulsion' and the term 'oversharing' harboring negative connotations, an opposing readership developed which celebrated candid perspectives. Blogger Andrew Wille (2016) defined *The Argonauts* as 'a memoir whose oversharing tendencies never failed to deliver,' exclaiming at 'behold[ing] such frankness!' The reception of *The Argonauts* was almost resoundingly positive. For instance, reviewers characterized the book as 'miraculous' and noted Nelson as 'one of the sharpest ... thinkers of her generation' (Laing 2018). Theorist Jackie Stacey (2018) claims that a 'swoony kind of fandom ... circulated in response to the book's publication' (205). The text sold widely, becoming a *New York Times* bestseller and winning several awards (2015a back cover). The popularity of *The Argonauts* led to the release of *Bluets* in the United Kingdom in 2017, originally published in 2009 in the United States to minor acclaim (Francis 2017). *Bluets* gained popularity and was reviewed as 'beautiful' with 'turbo-charged vitality, precision and authenticity' (Francis 2017; Graham 2017). Nelson's significance as a writer resounds in these reviews, and she is now recognized as a pioneer of life writing.

Technology in the mid-2010s enabled a wide reach for Nelson's texts, despite neither her form nor themes embodying mainstream ideals. Around this time, the rise in social media and blogging allowed for greater awareness of what would previously have been underground texts. They offered a more global, networked audience. Furthermore, widespread technology facilitated sharing conducive to texts centered on personal revelation. Social media, blogging and reality television, for instance, are predicated on the impression of transparency. Here, users are able to provide an unmediated version

of themselves, outside of previously restricted publishing routes which governed who and what could be shared. User-generated content of an ‘intimate nature’ abounds in these digital spaces, making frankness more commonplace and therefore more readily accepted in other mediums, such as published life writing (Deery 2015: 10). Social media and blogging are also episodic, being produced in seemingly real-time to cover individual incidences of daily life or one-off themes – the extensive circulation of fragmented first-person content found in such formats primed readership for the kind of work Nelson produced. Thomas Larson (2011) notes that Nelson’s style of short passages moving forward through ‘micro-linkages’ works with the kind of distracted reading that comes from technology. He claims her work is the kind ‘you might read on an iPhone or an iPod [or] while you’re online, where the majority of us, if we admit it, operate these days.’

Changing social attitudes also contributed to Nelson’s resonance. Queer and crip theory and activist movements were gaining recognition, with conversations on gender and body-normativity beginning to circulate during her time of writing. Louis Staples (2019) claims that there has been a rise in LGBTQIA+ representation in popular culture and a ‘mainstream appetite for queer stories’ from 2010 onwards. Despite increased depictions, he notes that this has often been superficial and ‘at odds with the lived experience of many’ who identify as queer. Similarly, G. Thomas Couser (2005) suggests that while ‘disabled people have been *hyper*represented in mainstream culture,’ these representations have historically been ‘objectifying’ and utilized as narrative devices rather than accurate portrayals (603). Such imagery began to find a counterbalance with the increased interest in disability studies within the academy, but this has yet to translate fully to popular culture (McRuer, 2006: 172). Misrepresentation hints at the continued lack of knowledge and acceptance for queer and crip people’s realities in mainstream society. As such, *The Argonauts* and *Bluets* were received by an audience accustomed to personal revelation and hungry for crip and ‘queer stories.’ Nelson exploits autotheory to engage with self-exposure and co-construction in a way that makes crip and queer lives familiar and verified in normative society in a way that has not been seen before.

I have begun by situating Nelson’s work through the tradition of autotheory and the text’s reception to establish how her writing is pioneering even within an experimental genre and the context which enabled Nelson to defy received thought and reveal radical ways of being. I will now closely examine the theme of care. I will show that Nelson capitalizes on the flexibility of autotheory to expose recognizable life events and form inclusive co-constructed texts that challenge the othering of crip and queer identities.

“It is always taking care”

Nelson foregrounds care for others in her texts. She offers insight into hidden acts of care to trouble mainstream familial frameworks and individualism, favoring crip and queer community practices. In doing so, she moves away from the story of the self found in earlier autobiographical traditions and its concurrent links to self-sufficiency. Instead, she builds on collectivity in the area to provide a shared portrayal of subjecthood that dissolves difference whilst maintaining specificity. Ideas of collectivity alongside specificity are deep rooted in disability-led conceptions of care. Jenny Morris (2001) describes the necessary foundations of care, in any form, as beginning with ‘common humanity’ and equal human rights (15). Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) elaborates on care from the perspectives of ‘collective care’ and ‘care webs’ (48; 50). She details a range of empowering caring practices from disabled, primarily Queer and Trans Black, Indigenous and People of Color, noting actions that aid day to day tasks, enable access or increase comfort. All of the practices Piepzna-Samarasinha cites share the commonality of being outside of charity, reciprocal without necessitating equal exchange, and tailored to individual needs, often with joy and friendship included.

The descriptions of care offered by the disabled community are outside of medical models and state governed sources, and therefore freer from the stigmas found in wider society. Depictions of caring have historically been limited by being restricted to domestic or medical settings. In part, this is perceived to offer dignity to those receiving care. However, it also speaks of the taboos of presenting illness, infirmity or ageing, which are frequently viewed in able-bodied culture as ‘deviance, helplessness, insufficiency, and loss,’ and result in these experiences being hidden from public view (Mintz 2007: 1). In addition, care is rarely viewed as extraordinary or noteworthy and is defined by self-described ‘crip queer Mad’ theorists Lindsay Eales and Danielle Peers (2020) as ‘deeply undervalued’ (9). Instead, it is a form of labor that often entails repetitive, mundane tasks.

Qualities of ‘privacy’ and ‘banality’ often associated with care mirror popular definitions of ‘oversharing,’ revealing caring as a topic considered uninteresting and inappropriate in broader society (Agger 2015: 2-3). Nelson elucidates this reception through an anecdote about an academic seminar she attended in which Professor Jane Gallop showed photographs of herself and her baby son naked to discuss caregiving and subjectivity. Nelson describes Gallop’s interlocutor Professor Rosalind Krauss as publicly ‘dismembering’ Gallop ‘for taking her own personal situation as subject matter’ (2015a: 41). Krauss implied that Gallop was narcissistic and ‘should be ashamed for trotting out naked pictures of herself and her son in the bathtub, contaminating

serious academic space with her pudgy body and unresolved, self-involved thinking' (41). By contrast, Nelson recounts relishing Gallop 'hanging her shit out to dry' (42).

Care is a topic on which Nelson actively centers both *The Argonauts* and *Bluets*. Nelson does this, firstly, by exposing traditionally private, intimate acts of care for her queer family as a route into exploring queer and crip lived experience. She details caring for her trans partner, Harry, following top surgery. Here, she embodies the conventional role of the dutiful wife whilst complicating the stereotypical image by applying it to specifically queer circumstance and divulging the particulars. She recounts Harry's emergence from the surgery room where he is playfully described as 'hilariously zonked from the drugs, trying in vain to play the host while slipping in and out of consciousness' (2015a: 79). Harry is positioned as temporarily disabled by being situated in a medical setting and described as 'zonked' and 'slipping in and out.' This comical scene is followed by Nelson dwelling on aftercare minutiae, depicting how 'over and over again we emptied your drains into little Dixie cups and flushed the blood stuff down the hotel toilet' (81). Nelson acknowledges the task's repetitive nature as she offers the fine points of draining Harry's fluids. However, she maintains a tone of endearment and avoids medicalized language by using terms like 'stuff.' She qualifies the activity directly to Harry by stating 'I've never loved you more than I did then, with your Kool-Aid drains, your bravery in going under the knife to live a better life' (81). Her declaration of love at this seemingly unpalatable moment, alongside characterizing the 'blood stuff' as the popular cherry drink 'Kool-Aid,' creates an ultimately sweet and humble scene of familiarity. Nelson crafts poetry from the experience in rhyming 'knife' with 'live a better life' and reveals its gravity in allowing Harry happiness. Here, requiring care is positive and empowered. Nelson's depictions distance care from boredom and lack of dignity whilst maintaining it as 'difference ... legible on the body ... and outside of the norm' as queer and crip (McRuer 2006: 11). Nelson's willful exposure of an intimate scene and its details provides insight into marginalized circumstance in a way that makes these lives knowable and relatable without omitting challenging details.

Nelson also exposes relationships in which care takes place outside of recognized family structures. She depicts acts of care for her disabled friend throughout *Bluets*. Referred to as 'my friend' throughout, she is reportedly the queer academic Christina Crosby, who was rendered quadriplegic following an accident (Borich 2016). Nelson candidly describes the 'complicated maneuver' of getting her friend into a wheelchair which they have drolly dubbed "'the transfer'" (2017: 38). She notes this 'often sends her [friend's] legs into excruciating spasms, during which time all [Nelson] can do is press down on them and say, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, until the shaking stops' (38).

The pain and desperation of providing simple and necessary care are laid bare in her matter-of-fact description, yet Nelson's tenderness towards her friend is palpable in her apologies. Crosby, in her own autobiography, describes the power of Nelson's care and friendship. Crosby asserts that Nelson's writing about her disability was a 'gift,' and one that Crosby encouraged Nelson to publish (2016: 8-9). Their dual narratives and joint publishing decision signals the friends' interdependence. As with caring for Harry, Nelson's depictions avoid medical language and instead center on aiding her friend's participation in the wider world, to 'live a better life, a life of wind on skin' (2015a: 81). Care enables her friend to move through the world without the use of her now paralyzed limbs. Sharing these acts of care further extends participation by creating a presence in the public eye for those who are hidden or misunderstood.

By making her friend known, Nelson publicly positions care within an alternative family structure. Her portrayal of family making has been noted by Mayer (2018), who traces its Black trans history. Mayer identifies its lineage through houses in the queer ballroom scene (189), a subculture centered on fashion and dance contests where competitors form group affiliations based on familial structures (Bailey 2013: 5). Mayer also connects queer family making to Alexis Pauline Gumbs's (2016) concept of 'motherING' which foregrounds the suffix 'ing' to demonstrate the role's separation from 'a gendered identity' in favor of interpretation as 'action' and 'nurturing work' (22-3; Mayer: 189). I would add to these examples the 'care webs' within the disabled community, described impassionedly by Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) as 'networks [...] we need to love and live, interdependently, in the world and in our homes, without primarily relying on the state or, often, our biological families,' whom she notes are frequently abusive (49). These alternative families and the actions they are centered on are apt as they focus on underground and unrecognized care patterns, which in Nelson's work are brought to the forefront by exposing herself and her kin.

Nelson's alternative family depictions take cues from the photography exhibition *Puppies and Babies* (2012) by A.L. Steiner, which features animals, pregnancy, and love, in a naturalistic, personal style. The images are frequently cited in *The Argonauts* and used to explicate Nelson's notion of caregiving made public and unrestricted by concepts of gender or fixed bodily ideals. Nelson describes *Puppies and Babies* as depicting 'care of all kinds' and 'partak[ing] in a long history of queers constructing their own families—be they composed of peers or mentors or lovers or ex-lovers or children or non-human animals' (2015a: 72). The exhibition is particularly apposite because it provides a broader visual guide to Nelson's experience and beliefs on public display. Through *Bluets* and *The Argonauts*' page layouts, scenes of care are provided as snapshots framed by white space, similar to Steiner's gallery images. The texts

separate each paragraph or proposition containing Nelson's memories with double line breaks and wide margins, allowing each moment to sit on public display in the books as alternative crip and queer family portraits.

Care as shared

Care is co-constructed as a shared experience, with Nelson prioritizing others' lives equally in her story of self. This is a radical act in portraying crip experience because, as Eales and Peers (2020) state, care is often 'a dirty word' within disabled communities due to it being posed as 'a unidirectional relationship' with acts done *to* bodies (4; 8). By contrast, in *Bluets*, accounts of Nelson's difficulty coming to terms with a breakup before she met Harry are intertwined with anecdotes of providing care for her injured friend. Nelson recounts an incident where she encounters a picture of her ex-partner, referred to as 'the prince of blue,' with another woman (2017: 36). She states that: 'I went over to the house of my injured friend and told her the story as I moved her legs in and out of the inflatable, thigh-high boots she wears to compress her legs while lying down so as to inhibit the formation of blood clots. *How ghastly, she said*' (46-7). Like moving her friend's legs to prevent blood clots, Nelson's acts of care are matched by her friend's recognition of Nelson's own pain. Both women are equally present in the passage. Nelson quotes her friend directly, demarcated by italics, allowing the friend's voice to feature in her account here and throughout the text. Nelson shows care as a reciprocal act.

The Argonauts offers a similarly shared space of experience in recounting care. Nelson's depictions of childbirth are twinned with Harry writing about caring for his mother as she is dying of cancer. In passages where Nelson is in hospital 'counting, counting' being told by her doula Jessica to 'breathe into the bottom ... where the baby is' (2015a: 129), Harry is brought into the narrative in the first person at his mother's bedside. He writes that '*each of the volunteers told me that my job was to let my mom know that it was ok to go*' (129). Italics mark out his voice, and his name is cited in the margin alongside each of his passages that intersperse scenes of Nelson's birth. The experiences are not portrayed as equivalent but intimately linked to form a necessary co-constructed experience of care and reliance.

Nelson's depiction of care challenges the prevailing view that care is predominantly needed by crips and queers, revealing it instead as universal. Firstly, this works to challenge compulsory able-bodiedness. As Robert McRuer (2006) elucidates, 'able-bodiedness ... masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things' (1). McRuer refers to this naturalization as 'compulsory' to show how able-bodiedness,

and therefore not requiring care, is taken as the standard against which all bodies are measured, and the Other is produced. Nelson, however, states unequivocally that ‘I do not feel my friend’s pain, but when I unintentionally cause her pain I wince as if I hurt somewhere, and I do’ (2017: 42). She does ‘hurt somewhere’ because of her own circumstance in losing her partner and in causing and witnessing her friend’s pain resulting from injury. Being close to her friend’s pain is something that Nelson maintains is a ‘privilege to me,’ something informed by her friend refusing to hold ‘any hierarchy of grief, either before her accident or after’ (42). The different causes for care inform one another, and each participant co-exists in a way that supports the other. This union offers a universalized portrayal of care relevant to all lives, removing its niche perception as particular to crips or queers. As Johanna Hedva (2016) states, ‘when being sick is an abhorrence to the norm, it *allows us to conceive of care and support in the same way.*’ Nelson shows the line between sick and well as blurred, with a multitude of experiences equally valid and pertinent to recount and all needing support. Requiring care is not a temporary state, but an ongoing process inherent to a life lived. By revealing this through co-construction, incorporating others’ biographies into her own narrative to build a fuller image of her identity and ideas, Nelson dismantles the view of crip and queer subjects as an ‘abhorrence to the norm.’ Further, as disability activist Mia Mingus (2011) asserts, independence is a ‘myth,’ a myth that according to Oche Onazi forms ‘the cornerstone of a culture of ableism’ (2020: 171). Nelson’s use of both her own and other’s experiences in depictions of care demonstrates relations and dependencies on a micro-level. She dispels the ‘myth’ and instead enacts the ‘interdependence’ that Mingus and others advocate.

Co-constructing non-normative communities of care through autotheory raises a challenge to ideals of progress in crip and queer lives. Jack Halberstam (2005) notes that standard chronology is mapped through progress towards conventional milestones of marriage and parenthood (2). This can be extended to wellness, happiness and recovery. People with disability are often required to provide stories of ‘heroic overcoming’ which are distanced from ‘living with injury – not fixing it’ (Minich 2015: 61). However, these stories are frequently unreflective of the ‘inconstant experience’ of disability and sit outside the notion of ‘crip time,’ which centers on ‘slowing and adapting models of time and productivity’ (Kim and Schalk 2021: 327; Mintz 2007: 4). Furthermore, as Halberstam elucidates in his definition, “‘queer’ refers to non-normative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time’ (6). Autotheory allows for progression’s disavowal for both groups. The genre can be read as constituting crip composition, a form of writing and living which McRuer (2006) notes works against the “cultural demand” for ‘orderly, efficient

prose' which is inextricably 'connected to the demands of compulsory heterosexuality/able-bodiedness that we inhabit orderly, coherent (or managed) identities' (5). Nelson revisits the same events and ideas across her texts, sharing widely and repeatedly through un-chaptered prose that jumps backwards and forwards in time and affirms that 'such revisitations constitute a life' (2015a: 112). In *Bluets*, Nelson portrays her own grief alongside her friends as they form key players in each other's support network. She does so using numbered propositions that she declares to have 'shuffled around countless times' and written varyingly 'drunk,' 'sober,' 'in agonized tears' and 'in a state of clinical detachment,' emphasizing the illusion of order (2017: 74). The fragments wind through subjects and states of feeling in a non-linear fashion reflecting her refutation of the standard temporality that organizes able-bodied and heteronormative lives and communities. They reveal how society attempts to manage particular kinds of subjects, and the misleading progression it demands, which, when not met, renders certain subjects as outsiders.

Many voices broaden categories

Nelson supports her experiences by quoting theorists who broaden the parameters of queer. Her texts are noted for their use of secondary sources and quotations, and these inclusions add weight and breadth to her individual circumstances. For instance, Nelson draws on the theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who she describes as the "'queen of queer theory,'" at multiple points across *The Argonauts* (2015a: 29). Nelson uses the words of Sedgwick to show the inclusivity of queer. She notes, 'Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wanted to make way for "queer" to hold all kinds of resistance and fracturings and mismatches that have little or nothing to do with sexual orientation' (29). Nelson paraphrases Sedgwick's work to widen the parameters of queer, in a way that can be read as incorporating a multitude of lives and practices. In the context of Nelson's treatment of care, this can be read as widening the parameters of crip too. She selectively highlights that 'resistance and fracturings' are integral as part of the demystification of queer taking place in the text but is quick to remove the fixation on sexual practice and relationships by noting it is 'little or nothing to do with sexual orientation.' Queer's relation to 'non-normative' is invoked in Nelson's repurposing of Sedgwick's ideas in ways that resonate with the crip experiences featured across her text.

The 'many gendered mothers of [Nelson's] heart' illustrates co-construction through a self-assembled familial network reflective of crip and queer communities (2015a: 122). Nelson uses the phrase frequently to refer to a host of referents, with whom she has both real and imagined relationships, including 'Schuyler, Ginsberg, Clifton, [and] Sedgwick' (105). According to Nelson, these people are 'many gendered,'

which provides a gender-neutral queer impression of intergenerational caregiving. The feminine familial title of ‘mother’ in the phrase signals her anti-essentialist view of mothering, where mothering is an act rather than a gendered identity. She acknowledges that she borrows the phrase ‘many gendered mothers of the heart’ from the poet Dana Ward. Nelson claims Ward applied the term to ‘everyone from Allen Ginsberg to Barry Manilow to his father’ (57). The references are humorously disparate, revealing the flexibility of chosen community and the terminology passed down from Ward to Nelson, another of her mothers. These mothers provide guidance for Nelson. She quotes their collective assertion: ‘no matter the evidence marshalled against their insistence: *There is nothing you can throw at me that I cannot metabolize, no thing impervious to my alchemy*’ (122-3). These words of wisdom take on the rejections of mainstream society, encompassed by the throwing ‘you,’ and embolden Nelson in her outsider status whilst emphasizing she can create her own ‘inside’ through the coven of mothers and the ‘alchemy’ she possesses. Nelson uses the first person ‘I’ to show the mothers speaking through her as a conduit of shared experience, allowing her own and others’ voices to amalgamate in an empowered stance. The names ‘Schuyler, Ginsberg, Clifton, [and] Sedgwick’ referred to throughout and in the margins act as a shorthand for ideas and lives Nelson wants to be linked to, rapidly co-constructing her identity using mothers she can be read through (105).

Nelson’s cited artistic and theoretical alliances keep with the concept of ‘chosen family’ in the queer community ‘to describe family groups constructed by choice rather than by biological or legal ... ties’ (Jackson Levin et al 2020: 1). The importance of chosen family for Mad and disabled people is also stressed by Eales and Peers (2020), who state that ‘interdependent queer crip Mad co-existence and co-creation are a vital situated means of learning about our social, cultural, and political circumstances and possibilities’ (2). Using theorists to create a chosen family aids self-knowledge and provides vital care outside of a rejecting societal framework for Nelson. Presenting her community on the page emphasizes the importance of interdependence and reflects how this can work in practice.

Conclusions

Through self-exposure, Nelson familiarizes crip and queer experience, embracing difference through detail whilst challenging stigma and otherness common to the categories. She rejects the mundane and pathological associations of ‘oversharing’ and shows the way self-exposure can deepen understanding of marginalized lives. The prosaic topic of care provides Nelson with a relatable route into revealing crip and queer existence. In foregrounding acts of care, Nelson represents the everyday tasks that

often remain hidden. In her portrayals, care is an ongoing, shared task that can take place in alternative familial and community frameworks that are as valid as better-known ones.

The genre of autotheory supports her subject matter. Nelson extends feminist practice towards crip and queer representation. The pliability of the form, despite loose norms, allows her to present her experience with fewer boundaries or preconceptions. It can sustain experience that is associative rather than chronological and mirrors Nelson's identity and her causes as distinctly queer and crip. The theoretical component embedded in autotheory enables Nelson to validate her experiences using co-construction. Nelson creates an alternative family and history that contextualizes the personal incidences she recounts. Her range of integrated sources adds to the quality of self-exposure found in her work and flattens the false hierarchies she is fighting.

Despite the inclusivity co-construction provides for Nelson's work, her omissions are undeniable. As already noted, and elucidated by Mayer (2018), Nelson rarely cites writers of color. The absences are more pertinent still when considering the roots of autotheory in Black feminism. Nelson attributes her work's categorization to Preciado, a trans memoirist, but does not acknowledge the term's broader tradition. *Bluets* and *The Argonauts* are certainly committed to Nelson's adage that no one 'has the monopoly on the so-called radical, or the so-called normative' (2015a: 73). She does crucial work challenging the otherness of crip and queer using self-exposure and co-construction. However, as inclusive as co-construction, in particular, can be, it is a technique that can also be used to exclude, here, in terms of race. Nelson has radically redrawn the boundaries, but this should not be where they remain set.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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