

Revaluing Memoir and Rebuilding Mothership in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*

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I^N *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson explores the possibilities of the memoir to reconceptualise maternity, deconstructing its cultural alignment with heteronormativity and division from queerness. While some scholars have focused on the book jacket's framing of 'autotheory' (Reid, Fournier), I would suggest that memoir enables Nelson to be considered within a wider community of those seeking to understand experiences of family-making through writing. Mobilised to describe a wave of recent writing that turns the critical gaze inwards, autotheory traverses the public and private, the intellectual and the emotional, theory and the personal. Yet, as Laura Edbrook points out, '[w]riting the personal, the intimate, the quotidian, the domestic and the particular has long been a strategy in the dismantling of patriarchal ideologies and discourse' and a means of modelling social reform (132). I want to take up Edbrook's questions of 'who . . . gets the privilege to speak . . . [a]nd with what language?' (126). While I do not discount the value of auto-theory as an emergent sub-genre, I have some hesitation around separating the work of a few from the many who are tackling similar issues without any specialised apparatus. I would suggest that including *The Argonauts* within the more capacious genre of memoir is important in terms of considering its political reach and evaluating how it might achieve its aim of transforming cultural constraints and anxieties around social reproduction. With its capacity to tell emotional truths (Poletti 360) and give voice to those typically rendered other and silent, memoir played a crucial role in both the women's and gay liberation movements of the late twentieth century. Given its focus on the intimate and everyday, memoir remains an optimal and accessible vehicle through which to explore complex, lived

experiences of care and diverse relationality that expand our understanding of the social contract.

So Mayer argues that the spectral figure that haunts *The Argonauts* is Medea, with Medea infamously taking revenge on Jason's betrayal by killing their children (118). The story of Medea links a failure of care with the failure of social reproduction. It draws attention to the core presumption underlying social reproduction that the mother is not only responsible for, but also the best person to undertake, care of the child. With the advent of capitalism, families were expected to undertake a greater role in social reproduction, that is, they bore a greater responsibility in socialising the next generation. In the gendered division of labour, this responsibility fell to the mother. It placed the needs of the child above the needs of the mother and fostered an ideology of sacrifice and intense devotion. Motherhood was presumed to be essential to female fulfilment and happiness.

In the late twentieth century, it was the sacral role of the child that typically drew consternation around queer relations. As Margaret F. Gibson discerns, the refrain 'But think of the children!' foregrounds anxiety over social reproduction (118). With *The Argonauts*, Nelson counters the presumed undesirability of LGBTIQ families by focusing on their growing recognition and normalisation. The trope (and tragic potential) of the isolated 'unhappy queer' is countered with a story of a blissful domestic circle of herself, her trans partner Harry Dodge, Dodge's son, and their son Iggy. While scholars like Francesca T. Royster have promoted the contemporary 'visibility and assimilation of queer lives' (v), Nelson is quick to caution against happiness being aligned with assimilation. For Nelson, assimilation is associated with conformity and similitude. In its place, she suggests that the norms of family, citizenship and motherhood need to be expanded to accommodate difference. She explores this through the trope of the Argo, with the Argo signifying the social order that crosses the sea of time. In Greek myth, the Argo could be rebuilt but still remain the Argo. For Nelson, the Argo also figures as the family, which remains the foundational building block for the social order. A central element of the family is the mother. While occupying the principal role of carer in *The Argonauts*, Nelson suggests a flexibility of who might assume the maternal role and how they perform the labour of care. While interrogating motherhood or 'the motherhood' as an institutional vessel, she explores the alternative conceptualisation of 'motherhood' as a set of practices.

Taking her cues from Judith Butler, she proposes a shift from a maternal identity to a performative maternity. She turns to D. W. Winnicott's concept of 'good enough' mothering to elaborate on performative maternity as a set of

practices that ensures that the child will receive ‘good enough’ care – not too much that it will be unable to differentiate from the mother and not too little that it will ultimately be lost to society. The memoir becomes a means by which Nelson explores the micro-politics surrounding the balancing act of these ‘good enough’ practices. In this essay, I argue that *The Argonauts* remains underscored by anxiety over the extent to which the mother might forego responsibility, that is, what mobile equation might exist between connectedness and separateness. This is compounded by Nelson’s difficulty in distinguishing social constraints from the ethical demands of maternity. I also argue that Nelson’s construction of an alternative genealogy and her pendulum swing from the extreme of tragedy to one of happiness (enacting what Heather Love views as an overcoming of a history of loss) risks rebuilding a hegemony of social reproduction.

Considering *The Argonauts* as a memoir rather than autotheory enables it to be viewed contextually in light of the memoir boom that began in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Rak 3). Following second-wave feminism and Stonewall, memoir epitomised the personal as political. The autobiographical text no longer simply provides insight into an individual subject but also provides insight into shared experiences (Felski 95). Embracing its own mediated, subjective nature, memoir’s focus on why experience matters questions universality and pre-set social scripts. Through this lens, *The Argonauts* might be viewed as both a queer memoir and a mothering memoir, with Silbergleid positioning it intersectionally as a ‘queer motherhood memoir’.

Justine Dymond and Nicole Wiley date the emergence of the mothering memoir back to the 1990s (2). In many respects, it offered a counter to what was dubbed the ‘new momism’. As the women’s movement encouraged women to enter the workforce in greater numbers than ever before, new momism formed a key part of the backlash (Hewett 121) by increasing the expected level of maternal care to an unattainable standard (Hewett 120). It prescribed, as Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels suggest, that in order ‘to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7 to her children’ (4). The mothering memoir gave women ‘the opportunity to “unmask” motherhood: to speak honestly, authentically of what it means to be a mother’ (O’Reilly 209). While mothering memoirs became increasingly popular, they received little academic attention (Buss) and even feminist journals of the early millennium were largely silent on the subject of motherhood (Kawash 872). In enacting a continuum between criticism and autobiography, Nelson deliberately troubles the division between the subject of mothering and theory. Significantly, Nelson is part of the third-wave generation of feminists who have now had children and write about it.

Jennifer Niesslein points out that this is the generation of mothers who have grown up as ‘beneficiaries’ of second-wave feminism but that they are also the generation ‘to grapple with the issues still unresolved’ (Greenberg).

Mothering memoirs have been critiqued for replicating neoliberal structures of power and normativity. Heather Hewett argues that they have been dominated by white, middle-class women (122) while Ivana Brown notes an emphasis on gender dualism (202). While Hewett argues that this has begun to change with online publishing forums like *Hip Mama*, other scholars are less positive. Deesha Philyaw argues that ‘the absence of black mommy memoirs mirrors the relative absence of black women’s voices in mainstream U.S. media discourse about motherhood in general’ (qtd. in Arosteguy 417). In many respects, *The Argonauts* follows the typical motherhood trajectory in moving across stages of courtship, partnering, nesting (finding the first house), pregnancy, and then childbirth, while stopping before the birth-child gets much older. There is also the usual juggling between family and work and challenges to selfhood. Nelson reflects that ‘writing has been the only place’ where she has found ‘*my own me*’ (58), yet now ‘*I cannot hold my baby at the same time as I write*’ (45, emphasis in original).

Part of the success of mothering memoirs is their capacity to mitigate isolation, with Stephanie Hammerwold noting their ‘transformative potential, which allows the reader to see her own story (or pieces and feelings of her story) reflected . . . and to see the experiences of others represented in memoir.’ Queer memoirs similarly tap into a need for community. Royster argues that, ‘For LGBT[I]Q writers, both life writing and queer theory have traditionally been places for individual and collective exploration, ways of understanding the self through the larger fabric of culture and history and relationality’ (vi).

Nelson’s desire to expand normativity is part of a larger critical shift to reconceptualise queerness. *The Argonauts* was published the same year as a special issue of *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* that questioned queerness being defined through the paradigm of antinormativity. Its editors, Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson, challenged traditional characterisations of the norm as ‘restrictive’ and as that which ‘excludes’ (12), arguing instead that norms are more capacious and complex in their entanglements. Nelson cites Sedgwick’s framing of ‘queer’ as a ‘nominative, like Argo, willing to designate molten or shifting parts’ (35). In this respect, it ‘hinges much more radically and explicitly on a person’s undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation’ (Sedgwick 9). The memoir becomes a means by which Nelson can reflect on her own acts of family-making that then open to a more expansive filiation. For her, queerness is not op-

positional to normativity but rather reconstitutes it through rethinking and rebuilding relationality from day to day.

Scholars of queer memoir often collapse queer living with an innovative or experimental representation. Royster argues that queer life writing blurs ‘boundaries of form, moving fluidly between autobiography and fiction, political treatise and personal manifesto, memoir and theory’ (vi). While mothering memoirs also focus on the transformation and dispersion of the body, they are often less experimental in form. This perhaps relates to the chronology of pregnancy, birth and after as offering a ready-made narrative arc but it might also stem from the perception of motherhood as split between what Adrienne Rich identified as ‘enforced identity’ and as ‘profound experience’ (196–97). Motherhood is paradoxically both formulaic and beyond containment. Like queerness, it seems without an adequate language. As Sara Ruddick notes in *Maternal Thinking*, words cannot approach the affective experiences, ‘the ordinary/extraordinary pleasures and pains of maternal work (29). Nelson is also cautious of turning experience into language, stating that once something is named, ‘we can never see it the same way again. All that is unnameable falls away, gets lost, is murdered’ (4). While replicating the typical narrative arc of the mothering memoir, the work’s use of flashback troubles teleological progression and its collaged body is conscious of its own textual contingency.

Conscious of how she occupies both an identity and a language shaped by neoliberalism leads Nelson to admitting feeling ‘in drag as a mother’ (Kwon) and ‘in drag as a memoirist’ (142). The latter signals her awareness of memoir’s performativity to a public and the weight of presumptions around memoir’s authenticity. A similar weight of performativity exists around motherhood. As Butler outlines, drag can reveal the artifice of a heterosexual ‘original’ and destabilise distinctions between ‘copy and original’ by demonstrating identity as ‘a kind of imitation for which there is no original’ (‘Imitation’ 722). In applying Butler’s framework, Nelson questions the notion of mothering as pre-cultural and shifts it from a category of identity to a practice. Bothered by an ex’s digs that she is just playing house, Nelson wonders what it would mean for it to be real. She argues that ‘any fixed claim on realness, especially when it is tied to an identity, also has a finger in psychosis’ (17).

As an alternative, she invokes Winnicott’s definition of ‘feeling real’ as the ‘collected, primary sensation of aliveness’ (17). She adds that it is not reactive nor an identity but affective: ‘a sensation that spreads’ (17). In an interview with Annie DeWitt, Nelson says that she wanted *The Argonauts* ‘to intimate things that fall outside of categories, or language, even, by being exceptionally clear about what I see, think, apprehend.’ She borrows Annie Dillard’s phrase

of ‘something bright, then holes’ which describes a hand ‘by a newly sighted person, a literal description of what she sees, while also serving as a description of a feeling, an apprehension of presence and absence’ (DeWitt). Such a description would still use ordinary words but with attention to their possibility. An example is her use of the term ‘doldrums’, reflecting from Snediker that it is less ‘easy to wax lyrical about “doldrums”’ (56). In contrast, Nelson sees ‘revolutionary language as a sort of fetish’ (33).

Nelson, then, reconceptualises mothering as like, or as, queerness. She occasionally still slips into a division between normative and queer, such as when she describes pregnancy as ‘inherently queer . . . insofar as it profoundly alters one’s “normal” state, and occasions a radical intimacy with – and radical alienation from – one’s body’ (16). Such a state, according to Nelson, is ‘strange and wild and transformative’ (16). She also approaches Rich’s ‘profound experience’ of maternity when she invokes Winnicott’s phrase ‘feeling real.’ In saying this, she is not gesturing towards essentialism, as Rich does. Nor is she gendering primary maternal preoccupation as Winnicott does when he suggests that ‘when a woman has a strong male identification she finds this part of her mothering function most difficult to adhere’ (qtd. in Hollway 34). Rather, for Nelson, it is that which is beyond gender categories or available language. Otherwise, she acknowledges that mothering is principally constructed through iterative practices. As Nelson reminds us: ‘You, reader, are alive today, reading this, because someone once adequately policed your mouth-exploring’ (25).

Mielle Chandler argues that terms like mother and queer exist within iterative ‘binary systems which require repudiation and subjugation of the other or opposite’ (30). Nelson cites the division made between normativity and queerness through Susan Fraiman’s example of ‘a heroic gay male sexuality as a stand-in for queer’ that repudiates ‘procreative femininity’ (84). For Chandler, a queer maternity would work to undo such systems of binary difference:

1. Engagements in maternal practices as, in a sense, ‘queer’: as both the same as and other than the other, as in-relation with and separate from.
2. Desubjugation of maternal forms of subjectivity through engagements in maternal relations regardless of one’s categorical positionality.
3. Proliferation of maternal practices, forms of subjectivity, and ethics, into self-other relations of all kinds. (31)

I suggest that Nelson gravitates towards Winnicott’s concept of ‘good enough mothering’ as a roomy hold-all for maternal performativity while using the memoir as a means to transpose and enact it through a genre that might be viewed as a commons, that is, as available to all. Winnicott views an initial

psychic merging between the mother and child in which the child's needs are foremost. Yet a good enough mother gradually reduces the level of attention to the point that other interests are not excluded, resulting in the child being able to separate and develop its own identity. In this respect, 'good enough mothering' is a balancing act. For Nelson, the vagueness of 'good enough' enables the accommodation of difference within maternal practices. While the focus is still on a central figure to generate an appropriate environment of care, it is a range of maternal practices which is paramount.

She goes on to describe Winnicott's notion of good enough mothering as 'ordinary devotion' (45). Describing the intensity of her feelings towards Iggy as 'romantic, erotic, and consuming' (55), she acknowledges such eroticism as taboo and defuses it through adding, 'Even if I do feel turned on while I'm breastfeeding or rocking [her baby] to sleep, I don't feel the need to do anything about it (and if I did, it wouldn't be with him)' (55). This identification of limits, sometimes followed by a refusal to cross them, is apparent throughout *The Argonauts*. Maternity, queer or otherwise, will have ethical limits, such as a refusal to undertake those iterative practices (such as feeding and cleaning) that may negatively impact on the welfare of the dependent child. The issue of sexuality reappears in *The Argonauts* through Nelson's discussion of Catherine Opie's tattoo of the word 'pervert'. It is 'visible, albeit ghosted, across her chest' but 'no longer legible as such'; adult sexuality remains simply a trace within the practices of mothering. Nelson notes how Opie's sense of 'balance is admirable' and that it's 'not always easy to maintain' (80). She adds that the difficulty in shifting between sexual desires and maternal care 'is not the same thing as an ontological either/or' (81). It is perhaps significant that Winnicott's framework of mothering is materialist and does not speak to a role of fantasy as do psychoanalytic approaches by Freud and Klein. Nelson broaches this only once, citing Dodge's agitation at the 'banishment of cock' from 'the category of women': '*In whose world is the morphological imaginary defined as that which is not real?*' (78, emphasis in original)

While Nelson raises the concept of sodomitical maternity, sexual practices and maternal practices are kept enough apart. Turned away from a R-rated trapeze burlesque show because she is carrying her five-month-old baby, she is outraged. Iggy is presumed by her to be too young to be impacted by the show (83–84). Instead, it becomes a debate over access to spaces and who polices what is acceptable. Nelson views the moment as one which reinforces divisions between mother and queer and as a line that she is told not to cross. It becomes one of a number of examples where Nelson uses memoir to critique those who subjugate forms of maternal subjectivity. Other examples include her experience of witnessing Krauss shaming Gallop (50) as well as a work

superior who presumes mothering and research to be mutually exclusive (46). Nelson also critiques the interpretation of smugness applied to pregnant women and mothers, including at one time by herself (112–13). While she questions her own contentment and even pleasure at undertaking domestic rituals, Dodge suggests that she embrace and even ‘honor’ ‘where there has been shame’ (39). Frightened by the word ‘honor,’ she prefers honesty as an ‘antidote’ to shame (40).

In the example of witnessing Gallop’s presentation of her research (which was later published as *Living with His Camera*), Gallop’s messiness is presented as a positive example of ‘good enough mothering’ (49). She also cites with approval Jimmy Schuyler’s depiction of his mother who ‘plays the radio all night, leaves out the dishes just so, watches her TV programs . . . and bickers with Schuyler about his desire to leave the windows open to the rain’ (130). Even Ginsberg’s representation of his love for his mother Naomi with her ‘smell of asshole’ (69) is an example of a relationality that is not only good enough but generous (significantly, while the incident threatens to cross the maternal and sexual, this does not actually occur).

The Argonauts is not only critical of how mothers are repudiated but also of how non-normative families face social disapprobation. She points to Fanny Howe’s awareness ‘that the outside world was ready and waiting – and all too willing to reinforce the color divide’ and that while she ‘is of her [biracial] children and they are of her . . . they do not share the same lot’ (109). She also raises the structural vulnerability of step-parents becoming targets of hatred and resentment. Yet memoir can also point to transformative acts. She notes how each positive mention of a step-parent in public makes her heart ‘skip a beat’ (27). She also retells the anecdote of a sales assistant exhibiting confusion over the ownership on a credit card (due to the name on it). When Dodge declares that it is his card and that ‘It’s complicated’ (111), the man hands back the card and says ‘No, actually, it’s not . . . Not complicated at all’ (111). The memoir therefore becomes a means to expand both an understanding of what constitutes a family as much as expanding what constitutes maternal practices.

In its poetics, Nelson’s memoir makes and remakes meaning around a practice such as step-parenting. This might constitute what Mieke Bal calls an ‘on-going, spiralling form of analysis-theory dialectic’ (124) and is achieved through episodes that are usually quotidian in nature, often registered associatively, and which lead to further questioning. An example of this is a friend’s teasing characterisation of a Christmas mug as heteronormative, with its photo of Nelson and Dodge’s family dressed up and looking happy against the back-

drop of mantel-hung stockings. Nelson notes that the photograph was part of a Christmas family tradition that she experienced as a girl (15). It leads to the question: ‘When do new kinship systems mime older nuclear-family arrangements and when or how do they radically contextualize them in a way that constitutes a rethinking of kinship?’ (16)

For Nelson, such family traditions are to be embraced rather than rejected. In an interview, she suggests that it is important to consider the reasons why certain practices are undertaken. She cautions against their performance if merely to ensure queer respectability:

I do think it’s worthwhile to pay close attention . . . to the seductions of normalcy – it can feel so good to be included into the fabric of something that’s been excluding you! It can feel so good to exchange stories about your kids with someone whom you suspect would otherwise find you disgusting! But you’ve got to watch it. (Fitzgerald)

Part of this includes marriage as Nelson discerns: ‘If we want to do more than claw our way into repressive structures, we have our work cut out for us’ (32). She notes the limitations of the legislative language of ‘same-sex’ in reducing the range of loving relationships. Retelling her and Dodge’s decision to marry before changes to California’s marriage legislation, she turns to parody to critique the alignment of marriage with a happy-ever-after narrative. Echoing and revising the heteronormative agency in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Nelson shifts from ‘I’ to ‘we’ in proudly announcing ‘Reader, we married there’ (30). ‘There’ refers to the Hollywood Chapel, a place that unabashedly embraces artifice with its ‘fake flowers’ and ‘peach faux finish’ (30).

Using the memoir form enables an exploration of the complexity of lived experience. On the one hand, Nelson advocates on behalf of step-parents and describes her positive relation to Dodge’s son (being known as Bombi, ‘a relative of Mommy, but with a difference’ (28)). On the other hand, she relates the difficulties of her relationship with her stepfather. The latter is an example of bad parenting and speaks to the fallibility of families and the potential failure of social reproduction. Another example of bad parenting is Dodge’s birth mother who refuses to accept the charges of a collect phone call from her son who has woken after being ‘found unconscious in a parking lot, covered in blood’ (172). This neglect, which Nelson suggests has been fuelled by alcoholism, is beyond the neglect associated with ‘good enough mothering’ and falls into bad mothering. The consequences, as predicted by Winnicott, are dire. Nelson contrasts the lack of mothering by Dodge’s birth mother with the care given by Phyllis, Dodge’s nonbiological ‘real mother’ (173).

To a certain extent, Nelson defines her practices as ‘good enough’ through differentiating them from her mother’s. While generous with Gallop’s excesses, she is less accepting when they are apparent in her own mother and critical when her mother exhibits flaws. Besides deploring her mother’s ‘obsess[ion] with skinniness as an indicator of physical, moral, and economic fitness’, Nelson is ‘horrified’ by her mother’s Christmas mug because of its gigantic size (15). She is ‘vaguely hurt’ that her mother doesn’t want to look at the birth photos (19) and finds her mother’s lamination of the page listing Nelson as a Guggenheim recipient embarrassing. She repurposes it as a mat placed under Iggy’s high chair to catch food waste (19). The embarrassment continues in relation to her mother’s sexism in believing weathermen to be more accurate than their female counterparts.

Nelson checks herself to ensure that she does not replicate her mother’s practices. She wonders if she is being similarly sexist in reading baby books only by male experts yet suggests that there is perhaps no other choice available (54). She foregrounds her mother’s seeming replacement of a maternal body with a sexual body and derides her mother’s reliance on and subjugation to an oppressive partner. Such childhood history is one which has its share of tragedies and is not glowing with domestic bliss. Nelson notes that in having a son, she mourned the fantasy of a ‘feminist daughter, the fantasy of a mini-me’ who might ‘serve as a femme ally to me’ (108) in the house. Without this ally and turning away from her own mother, Nelson constructs an alternative genealogy, a kinship of ‘many-gendered mothers of my heart’ (71). These are theorists or writers, women and men, who have shaped Nelson’s thinking and sense of self. Nelson names them as paratexts to the memoir and quilts them into the main text. So Mayer suggests that Nelson takes her cue from Butler’s reading of a house as ‘the people you walk with’ (Kotz 83), a concept pioneered by transwomen of colour and requiring embodied activity. Providing a sense of agency in family-making, it also enables Nelson to create an alternative positive mapping and shift more negative or problematic filial connections into the background.

Many of Nelson’s ‘many-gendered mothers’ are in one form or another truth-tellers. She is critical of Anne Carson’s bracketing off of the unsayable yet praises Mary Oppen’s telling of her birth experiences after many years of silence (44). Nelson proudly states that her favourite college professor of feminist theory ‘is now writing autobiography – something she never would have dreamed of doing back when she was my mentor’ (74). She also reflects upon A. L. Steiner’s ‘Puppies and Babies’ installation as an example of genderqueer family-making. Steiner’s installation extends maternal practices to caretaking of all kinds, including interspecies love. While Mayer is critical of the absence of a

Black queer and trans feminist (literary) genealogy in *The Argonauts*, Nelson acknowledges some limits in what she can connect to and recite. She writes that Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals* (20) and Maya Angelou's *I Heard the Caged Bird Sing* (82) are framed through an experience of race that is beyond her, just as Dodge's experience of not feeling free (39) in both body and world is unknowable to her (110).

It is significant that Nelson emphasises domestic happiness through figures like Gallop, Oppen and Steiner. In countering the archetype of the 'unhappy queer,' she perhaps risks rebuilding a hegemony of social reproduction, cushioning her portrait of a new family in its wondrous honeymoon phase with genealogical accounts of affirmative love and care. This is perhaps truth told overly slant. Sara Ahmed cautions around the ideal of happiness given the limited freedom of many. Citing this (20), Nelson nevertheless stresses the pleasure of maternal practices, particularly domestic ones, framing them as a choice rather than as a form of subjugation. Sam Huber argues that her focus on happiness echoes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's warning against moral injunctions and her golden rule that 'If you can/be happy, you should' (Crosby 'Salon'). It is worth briefly contrasting *The Argonauts* with two other memoirs, both in the varying emphasis on happiness and the emphasis on the material world over fantasy. The first is Eileen Myles's *Afterglow* in which Myles critiques their own flaws as a carer of a dependent (their dog Rosie) and the complexity of feeling ('part discomfort & humiliation and part devotion' (5)) involved in this. Myles considers the memoir to be a form of ghostwriting, foregrounding the challenge of language to adequately represent love: 'Maybe my love has always been this way, a thing existing in language and so the ghost goes in and out of the girl it's based upon and now my dog' (58). Unlike Nelson, Myles speculates on the feelings of the other.

The second memoir is Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Like *The Argonauts*, it is built from many sources, with Lorde characterising it as 'biomythography'. Lorde generates a powerful maternal genealogy, noting the 'magical' nature of her mother's stories of Carriacou and how the 'word-combination of woman and powerful was almost unexpressable in the white American common tongue' (15). Like Nelson, she writes of 'feeling real' in sharing a mailbox tag with Muriel: 'For me, this was the real thing, a step from which there was no turning back. I wasn't just playing around any more, gay-girl. I was living with a woman and we were lovers' (201). Unlike Nelson's focus on the phrase 'good enough', Lorde embraces the phrase 'not enough' as a marker of normative excess, drawing strength from difference:

Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being

gay- girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different. (226)

Whereas Lorde's memoir is representative of an era of repudiation of normativity, Nelson's is representative of a later reformation of normativity. While Lorde explores a queer, maternal solidarity through non-Western myth, Nelson returns to foundational stories of Western society. Her perspective tends to work from the micro-level to the macro but never approaches the cosmological level of *Zami*. In *Zami*, painful and traumatic moments of oppression are combined with anecdotes of joy as mean to emphasise survival, growth and community. While experiencing a less-than-perfect childhood herself, Nelson transfers the question of survival in *The Argonauts* to Dodge, being cognisant of a difference in degree and her own social privilege.

Harold Braswell argues that Winnicott assumes a 'relatively high level of competence' in his conceptualisation of good enough mothering that does not take account of mothers who might have disabilities (245). In questioning mothering and kinship practices, Nelson's memoir constantly tests what might constitute 'good enough' practices to ensure social reproduction at the same time as it expands and reconceptualises its building blocks. Yet the phrase 'good enough' suggests a bar that needs to be reached and a continuing evaluation of competency. *The Argonauts* demonstrates the difficulties involved in such a balancing act and reinforces an internalised surveillance as much as it explores an ethical and queer turn in understanding maternity. Unlike *Afterglow* that sits with the ugly feelings associated when one is not quite 'good enough', *The Argonauts* is uncomfortable with or avoids reflecting upon aspects of incompetency or flawed care.

Julie Avril Minich points out that both queer and disability life writing have emerged out of the memoir boom and draw attention to 'bodily and mental vulnerability' (61). Citing Heather Love, she suggests that they often circulate truths about 'what it is like to bear a "disqualified" identity, which at times can simply mean living with injury – not fixing it' (Love 4). Nelson, I would argue, is somewhat limited by her use of Winnicott as a base for developing a vision of queer maternity. Her metaphor of The Argo – or social reproduction – is open to accommodation, yet still raises questions as to whether there are parts that cannot replace or be replaced or parts that do not necessarily fit. What happens to more complex articulations of love, to those that are blended with more negative feelings of embarrassment and shame, such as Nelson's own in relation to her mother? *The Argonauts* leaves the reader where most mothering memoirs

do, with the child still in infancy. It concludes with the promise of and optimism about a happy future. Mothership and social reproduction, in expanded form, continue successfully. Nelson does make a compelling case for queer maternity but it is one that needs further rebuilding and development. The value of the memoir is its capacity to both open up and to trouble representation in the political sense of the term. In viewing *The Argonauts* as memoir, it can be read alongside other memoirs that together explore a multitude of experiences and truths (both overlapping and different) so that the reader may harbour a network of motherships.

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