From Micro to Macro: Anecdote and Citation in Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*

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Abstract

Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015) maps the story of Nelson’s relationship with Harry Dodge, a genderfluid artist, from the beginnings of their relationship, through to moving in together, getting married and the eventual birth of their child, Iggy. Rather than present this intimate narrative in a linear fashion, *The Argonauts* is composed of fragments of reflective prose, which mobilise anecdote and citation as their central forms. This thesis draws on Heather Love’s recent work on microanalysis to investigate the effects of *The Argonauts’* combination of the macro frames of social theory and art (the citational) with small-scale reflections of daily life (the anecdotal). It considers how Nelson uses self-disclosure to critique the queer cultural politics around maternity, kinship and caretaking. As such, this thesis demonstrates the critical potential of micro-forms of observation, description and analysis as they emerge in the aesthetic framework of life writing.
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Preface

The front cover of the Graywolf Press edition of *The Argonauts* by Maggie Nelson features a black background inscribed with the title and author’s name in a graphic mixture of pink and white block lettering reminiscent of a graffiti stencil.¹ The dictionary glosses an argonaut as a member of the crew who sailed with Jason on the ship *Argo* to seek out the Golden Fleece. As it transpires, the title of Nelson’s text is a reference to the work of Roland Barthes who draws on the Greek myth to claim that the subject’s recitation of “I love you” is like “the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name” (*Argo*, 5). In the opening pages of *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson relates sending Harry Dodge this Barthes passage as an early “love pronouncement” that left her feeling “feral with vulnerability” (*Argo*, 5). From this point forward, the thematically sprawling text finds its anchor in the *Argo* as a metaphor for an ever-changing unit – the couple – that nonetheless holds its form throughout numerous changes.

While intimate self-disclosure is typical of autobiographical writing, it is the use of self-disclosure as a starting point for cultural critique that renders *The Argonauts* noteworthy. The overall subject of Nelson’s critique is the perceived mutual exclusivity of terms that in Nelson’s life are marked by their overlap or disruption. This encompasses assumptions that pertain to subjectivity (motherhood vs. queerness, motherhood vs. sexual agency, pregnant vs. intellectual) as well as those that concern relationships (caretaking vs. fulfillment, self-reliance vs. dependence) in addition to queer politics (the normative vs. the transgressive). The central concern of my thesis is to trace how Nelson achieves this combination of self-disclosure and cultural critique through the mobilisation of anecdote and citation, which are the two formal pillars of the text. This achievement is contingent on the capacity of small-

scale observations of daily life (the anecdotal) to articulate characteristics of the cultural politics of gender and sexuality at large (a quality typically associated with the theoretical or analytical).

The citations in The Argonauts are mostly pulled from the last thirty years of feminist and queer theory. The array of cited writers and artists includes Sara Ahmed, Maya Angelou, Dodie Bellamy, Leo Bersani, Judith Butler, Anne Carson, Christina Crosby, Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, Lee Edelman, Michel Foucault, Susan Fraiman, Allen Ginsberg, Luce Irigaray, Wayne Koestenbaum, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Audre Lorde, Eileen Myles, Catherine Opie, Paul B. Preciado, Susan Sontag, Annie Sprinkle, Gertrude Stein, A.L. Steiner, Dana Ward and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Despite this apparent array, Nelson’s citational practice tends to gravitate toward three key figures: Roland Barthes, Eve Sedgwick and D.W. Winnicott. Yet, the citational roll call of The Argonauts also spreads from published writers, artists and theorists to reference reported conversations with friends, family members and strangers. Throughout the book, cited text appears either in quotation marks, italicised or as paraphrased text within original prose fragments. While some cited names are noted within the body text, other names emerge in the margins – a semi-scholarly template that The Argonauts replicates from A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments by Roland Barthes. There is no formulaic pattern to the relationship between the citations and Nelson’s original writing, nor is there an even rhythm to the length of the prose fragments which range from one line to twenty or more.

My interest in the use of citation in The Argonauts relates to the question of how Nelson secures narrative authority. The scholarly quality of the citational archive can be detected in

Nelson’s authorial profile, which gives her work an institutional and cultural context that is implicated in the reception of the text. On the back cover of the book, Nelson is described as a “poet, critic and nonfiction author” (Argo, back matter). The most casual of web searches reveals a wealth of other information. Nelson grew up in the Bay Area before moving to Connecticut to attend Wesleyan University.\(^3\) She then went on to complete a PhD in English Literature at the City University of New York.\(^4\) While living in New York, Nelson took poetry workshops with Eileen Myles.\(^5\) Within the text itself, we learn that while at graduate school, Nelson was in one of Eve Sedgwick’s classes (Argo, 111). Further research reveals that literary and critical theorists, Christina Crosby and Wayne Koestenbaum, were thesis advisers to Nelson in her undergraduate and graduate studies respectively.\(^6\) After graduate school, Nelson went on to teach at Wesleyan University, Pratt Institute and The New School, while at present she teaches in the creative writing program at California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles.\(^7\) The numerous prizes Nelson has received, including the recent award of a MacArthur Fellowship and a Guggenheim Fellowship in Nonfiction, further enforces her literary-theoretical credentials.\(^8\)

Nelson’s interest in kinship narratives and the use of citation in the aesthetic mode predates The Argonauts.\(^9\) For instance, in Jane: A Murder, a novel in verse, Nelson writes about the

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3 Paul Laity, “Maggie Nelson Interview: ‘People write to me to let me know that, in case I missed it, there are only two genders’,” The Guardian, April 3, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/02/books-interview-maggie-nelson-genders/.


7 CalArts, “Faculty/Staff Directory,” Cal Arts.

8 CalArts, “Faculty/Staff Directory,” Cal Arts.

murder of her 23-year-old aunt, Jane, in 1969. Nelson’s account of the reopening of the trial of her aunt’s murderer forms the basis of her subsequent book, *The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial*. The *Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* considers representations of violence in art with attending ethical questions posed of artists and audiences. In terms of content, *Jane, The Red Parts* and *The Art of Cruelty* can read like a trilogy. *Bluets* interrupts this sequence in its move away from violence towards a meditation on longing and loneliness, which is enacted through a social history of the colour blue. Constituted by poetic fragments and citations, *Bluets* is the book of Nelson’s that most closely mirrors *The Argonauts*. *Bluets* confirms how Nelson’s training in literary and social theory suitably positions her to repurpose fragments of theoretical texts for aesthetic ends. However, *Bluets* and *The Argonauts* are marked by differences in reception. While Moira Donegan notes that *Bluets* has been hailed as a cult classic, *The Argonauts*’ status as *New York Times* bestseller suggests that Nelson’s niche readership and reputation has since expanded into the mainstream literary marketplace. As a testament to this wide acclaim, positive reviews for *The Argonauts* can be sourced in online publications that promote a variant of feminist, queer or trans politics (*Feministing*, *Autostraddle*, *Bitch, Jezebel*) as well as literary magazines (*London Review of Books*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *n+1*, *Tin House*, *Overland*, *The Lifted Brow*) and daily print newspapers (*The Age*, *The Herald Sun*).

Reviews of *The Argonauts* consistently praise its combination of forms. In the opening pages of recommendation, the text is hailed as “a category of writing entirely new” by *Brooklyn Quarterly*, “a hybrid book [that] suggests a new path for memoir” by *Vulture*, “unconstrained  

14 Nelson, *Bluets*. 
15 Donegan, “Gay as in Happy,” *n+1*; CalArts, “Faculty/Staff Directory,” *CalArts*. 
by labels of form and genre” by Poets & Writers, and as “in a constant motion between criticism and memoir” by Feministing (Argo, front matter). On the back cover, the text is marketed simultaneously as “memoir/criticism”, “genre-bending memoir” and “autotheory” (Argo, back matter). As this illustrates, Nelson has established a reputation as a writer whose work moves between, and often combines, poetry, criticism and life writing. Part of the excitement generated around The Argonauts can be accredited to Nelson’s capacity to put these forms together, both on and off the page, in ways that are considered innovative and subversive.

At the same time, an overvaluation of originality risks obscuring the conventional lineage of the text in Nelson’s work and how it draws on the work of others. For instance, in an interview with The Guardian, Nelson explains how she conceives of herself as a writer within a “long history” of experimental life writing influenced by Roland Barthes, Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Hervé Guibert and Sylvia Plath. In terms of genre, I discuss The Argonauts using scholarship on autobiography and life writing. In what follows, I draw upon interviews with Nelson for their value as what Gerard Genette calls a “public epitext,” in which the meaning of the text is negotiated in spaces external to the book. Similarly, I treat reviews as equally valuable for the way they shape the circulation of the text in terms of who comes across it and how its reception solidifies into a reputation.

The Argonauts obliquely tells the story of Nelson’s relationship and eventual marriage to genderfluid artist, Harry Dodge. This matrimonial narrative includes an account of Nelson

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becoming a stepmother to Dodge’s child alongside her own pregnancy, which culminates in the birth of their son, Iggy. As previously noted, this intimate account of an expanding genderqueer kinship network features marginal citations that hold the reflective prose fragments that comprise the text together. Personal narratives are put in political frames by melding anecdote with theory. This hybridisation of low and high, popular and expert forms gives the book its internal rhythm and lets Nelson swerve between diverse subjects: from the weather forecast to Luce Irigaray (*Argo*, 38), from Judith Butler to the Russian and Turkish Baths on East Tenth Street (*Argo*, 54-5), from Eve Sedgwick to breastfeeding (*Argo*, 103). *The Argonauts’* non-linear narrative is structured by thoughts rather than events as Nelson switches registers between the poetic, the conversational and the theoretical. This mixture of forms and tones is key to how Nelson blends autobiographical and critical modes throughout the text.

In *The Argonauts*, Nelson’s established concern with the personal is funnelled through an endeavour that puts her experience of maternity, marriage and caretaking in conversation with queer politics. The summary offshoot of this is an understanding that motherhood need not be at odds with queerness, just as caretaking need not be in contradiction to fulfilment. Across the course of this short text, relations of care are intimately bound to narratives of genderfluid and maternal embodiment. As the text unfolds it becomes apparent that Maggie is already pregnant when Harry starts taking testosterone and has top surgery (*Argo*, 79). Similarly, Nelson’s narration of giving birth to Iggy is intercut with Harry’s account of his mother’s death (*Argo*, 129-136). Yet, the large scale of these life-altering narratives does not detract from the attention Nelson gives to the micro-politics of everyday life which surface in reported conversations that occur in various domestic and institutional spaces in New York and Los Angeles. It is this change in scale from the biographical to the institutional, along
with the shift between the anecdotal and theoretical observation, that captures my research interest and leads me to regard *The Argonauts* as exemplary of self-disclosure and cultural critique in an aesthetic framework.

Anecdote and Microanalysis

As I have outlined in the preface, *The Argonauts* is composed of fragments of reflective prose, citations and anecdotes that nonetheless adhere as a structured retrospective account of Nelson’s experience of relationship building and maternity. This combination of forms, which are all marked by brevity and self-containment in spite of their contribution to the larger story of Nelson’s intimate and writing life, enables the wide reach and shifting scale of the text, which moves from personal observation to abstract implication with relative ease. More precisely, Nelson’s use of anecdote in conjunction with citation puts the micro-description of everyday life into conversation with the macro frames of social theory, art and literature. Nelson writes herself at the intersection between the anecdotal and the citational, at the point where the minutiae of daily life is made to resonate with theory. Cleaving her writing-self between theory and the real, Nelson deploys autobiographical self-disclosure to produce cultural criticism. Hervé Guibert, who Nelson identifies as a literary influence in an interview with Vincent Scarpa from *Tin House*, encapsulates this approach with his claim that, “I am, as always in writing, both the scientist and the rat split open for his research.”

Following Guibert’s example, Nelson uses herself as a starting point for experimenting with the ways different forms of writing and their attendant politics can reverberate with or fail to articulate her reality. In the reality captured via anecdote, for instance, the intersection of queerness and maternity is revealed as a fraught and contradictory space to inhabit. For

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instance, “soft” maternity is pitted against “hard” intellectualism; relations of care and thinking are viewed in conflict and the pregnant body is both valorised and disparaged. However, as I will go on to demonstrate, the minor narrative unit of anecdote is not simply an endorsement of personal experience, but a form of microanalysis that reflects on wider cultural politics of gender and sexuality.

In an interview with Jess Cotton published in *The White Review*, Nelson expounds on her approach to anecdote and its formal possibilities and limitations. When asked how anecdote functions in the book as a narrative unit, Nelson answered at length:

> I was very interested in the unit. I don’t know if you’ve read Claudia Rankine’s book, *CITIZEN*. I know Claudia, and we were both talking about the way her microaggressions work in that book. There were more microaggressions in early drafts of my book, but I found I wasn’t really thinking in that way. She found a way to do something with them in that book that got way past the whole ‘listen to this fucked up thing someone just said to me’ kind of thing. But a lot of the time, the first version of my anecdotes, I would write down and find that they ended in a petty place. For me, that instrumental, dead-end use of anecdote is boring. More than that, it puts the writer in this self-righteous position of like, ‘I know that’s a messed-up thing to say.’ That’s a really boring subject position to me. So a lot of the anecdotes I wrote might have started petty, but I needed to get them to the next level. I had to be willing to let these anecdotes from life be as surprising as they sometimes are, instead of having the punch line to each one be like my or someone else’s ignorance.19

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If we provisionally accept Nelson’s measure for the poetic effectiveness of anecdote in *The Argonauts*, then we see that surprise must override the boring, petty and self-righteous tone seemingly endemic to the form. In Nelson’s account, securing the “next level” is contingent on tone and the positioning of the writer within the minor narrative. Specifically, Nelson represents surprise as something she wants to transfer from the real-life experience of the anecdote’s event to the literary effect produced in its textual documentation. Nelson suggests that in the relating of anecdotes, surprise is better sought over the impulse to use the ignorance of the narrator and/or others for anecdotal impact. I argue that in using the language of ignorance and surprise, Nelson implicitly frames anecdote around questions of knowledge. Yet, by keeping the brevity of anecdotes in view, attending questions arise: How can the compression of the form be mastered without rendering the content reductive? How can anecdotes generate resonance in an audience in spite of their compression?

Reflections on the connection between anecdote and knowledge have been made in the critical theoretical mode and can provide further insight into the deployment of anecdote in the aesthetic context of *The Argonauts*. In the cultural studies context, Kane Race has recently described the promise of anecdote as a “research device.” Race argues for anecdote as a means to rework “relations of knowledge, intimate experience, engagements with medicine, and so forth.” The significance of Race’s work is its attention to anecdote as a way to generate new knowledge and disrupt conventional knowledge arrangements. In arguing for the place of anecdote within a broader circuit of knowledge, Race legitimates anecdote as an access point to knowledge that would otherwise be overlooked. For instance, Race writes, “I am interested in the anecdote’s capacity to produce a form of knowledge that

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21 Race, “Reluctant Objects,” 16.
is partial and fragmentary, but also intimate and textured.”

Of equal interest to Race is exploring how anecdote positions the subject. Race points out that, “anecdote can make a joke of the sovereign subject” in that “people do not just act on things, things happen to people.” Yet, Race argues that anecdotes do not necessarily isolate the experience of the individual. He observes, “at its best, anecdote is not about me, and it is not about you, but about encounters we might find ways of relating to.”

Here Race’s emphasis on the possibility of what can be learnt from anecdotal exchanges further underlines the connection between anecdote and knowledge. It is worth reflecting that the social-science context of Race’s work demands that he justifies his deployment of anecdote, whereas in the context of life writing anecdote has preexisting currency. At the same time, some of Race’s propositions about anecdote can be usefully transferred to *The Argonauts*. Primarily, Race’s linking of anecdote to knowledge and intimacy leads me to question the knowledge anecdote produces in *The Argonauts*.

Meanwhile, in the context of literary theory Joel Fineman admires anecdote for being the “literary form or genre that uniquely refers to the real.” For Fineman, the potential of anecdote is found in its “peculiar and eventful narrative force” which he describes as producing a “seductive opening.” Meaghan Morris similarly understands anecdotes as “not expressions of personal experience, but allegorical expositions of a model of the way the world can be said to be working” that are “primarily referential.” In her later work Morris additionally points out that anecdotes can falter in their “nudging, insinuating mission” when

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22 Race, “Reluctant Objects,” 15.
23 Race, “Reluctant Objects,” 16.
24 Race, “Reluctant Objects,” 16.
they lack that which would give their content a “resonance” to others.\textsuperscript{28} As Morris outlines, the reception of the anecdote is contingent on the writer’s capacity to persuade the audience that their version of how the world operates is both credible and relevant. Whereas Morris posits that anecdotes advance an argument rather than articulate an experience, in the aesthetic framework of \textit{The Argonauts} anecdotes retain their status as both articulations of personal experience and allegorical expositions.

Just as anecdote traverses genres, so does microanalysis – a concept that provides an important critical backdrop for understanding anecdote. In her recent essay, \textit{Small Change}, Heather Love discusses the disciplinary history and literary afterlife of microanalysis—a method comprised of “small-scale observations of everyday life”—that first emerged as a tool of sociological description.\textsuperscript{29} While microanalysis gained only modest and short-lived popularity in the social sciences post World War II (422), Love is interested in the migration of microanalysis to the literary field and its recent emergence in the context of the recognition of “microaggressions” or those “small-scale verbal and nonverbal assaults” (423) that operate as “a point of articulation in a larger circuit of violence” (436). Specifically, the term microaggression is dated to the late 1960s and credited to Chester M. Pierce, a psychiatrist whose work focussed on the “long-term effects of everyday racism on African-Americans” (423). The term microaggression has since been used to diagnose quotidian manifestations of multiple forms of discrimination such as ableism, classism, homophobia, racism, sexism and transphobia (423). Love is particularly interested in how the ascription of microaggressions requires the descriptive capture of a small-scale everyday event in a form that links it to repercussions in the wider social field. It is this movement in scales from micro-observation


\textsuperscript{29} Heather Love, “Small Change: Realism, Immanence and the Politics of the Micro,” \textit{Modern Language Quarterly} 77, no. 3 (2016): 419, 422. Subsequent text references are provided in parentheses.
and description to macro forms of analysis that has implications for my understanding of the anecdotal method employed in *The Argonauts*.

In *Small Change*, Love focuses on the potential of the discourse of microaggressions to illuminate scenes of invisible racism through a close reading of Claudia Rankine’s recent work, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, a text that Nelson similarly admires in her *White Review* interview (423). *Citizen* is a critically acclaimed book-length lyric which Love describes as using “micro-observational techniques” to critique “the small-scale violence of everyday racism” in the United States (423-4). Disrupting our expectations of the lyric form, *Citizen* captures scenes of racism that transpire in spaces of varying publicity from comments made by customers in a Starbucks queue to referee calls made against Serena Williams at the 2004 U.S. Open (438-9). While *Citizen* crosses multiple genres including, “documentary, the essay, witness testimony, cultural criticism, memoir and the case history,” Love claims that it “gave the genre of the microaggression a place in American letters for the first time” (423-4). Love argues that since microaggressions in real life are characterised by their tenuous visibility, their textual documentation relies on brevity, descriptive precision and “the ability to conjure not only a social scene but also a larger social world with just a few words” (436). In Love’s account, *Citizen* exemplifies these characteristics through its documentation of large-scale racism through small-scale snapshot. We can conclude that aesthetically speaking, illuminating microaggressions is dependent on the writer’s capacity to describe the experience of an everyday event in a way that makes its perceived and enlarged social ramifications legible to a reader.

Love reads the descriptive accounts of microaggressions contained in *Citizen* through the framework of sociologist Robert M. Emerson’s essay *Ethnography, Interaction and Ordinary*
Trouble, which advocates for “interaction-rich” ethnographic fieldwork (426). As Love points out, Emerson observed that in his graduate school classroom his students’ interest in macrosocial factors such as gender, race, class and ethnicity was often prioritised as a point of discussion at the expense of giving attention to the small-scale manifestations of these macrosocial factors in “interactional processes” (426-7). In other words, Emerson’s students were so engaged by the big-picture of social injustice and its causes and correctives, that they ignored its enactment on an everyday level. Emerson posited that small-scale analysis found in interaction-rich ethnography might be a useful entry point into further understanding macrosocial factors.

The point of contention that Love concentrates on is whether or not Emerson’s proposed method produces a critique of social conditions or merely describes them. Love explores this question using an excerpt from Emerson’s own work, which takes as its object of study the tensions that arise between college roommates in everyday negotiations that range from disputes about the use of shared space, differing sleeping patterns and contested parking spaces (427-8). Love writes:

Descriptively rich as it is, this list not only bypasses larger questions of social inequality but raises the question of why we need this much fine-grained information about everyday life. Does such scholarship add to our knowledge of the world, or is it merely a reduplication of the world? (428)

Love makes the important point that microanalysis can falter when it fails to make these small-scale observations of daily life pertinent to an understanding of the macrosocial by stopping at the mere reproduction of the social in the textual.
Even though microanalysis emerged from within the disciplinary framework of sociology, Love claims that it now circulates across multiple genres and fields of study, one of which is the novel, as a forerunner in “fine-grained depiction of small-scale scenes of social interaction” and the versions of literary study derived from the novel form (424). However, Love’s specific project is not to analyse the use of small-scale sociological observation in the novel, but to make links between forms of microanalysis and recent work in queer, feminist, critical race and affect studies, which are all fields that pride themselves on dealing with the real (427). She notes that in these fields there has been an increasing emphasis on “the ordinary and the small-scale” that mobilises around the idea of an everyday politics (427).

Love also notes the proliferation of microaggression discourse in online spaces like Twitter, where necessarily short descriptions of everyday events (no more than 140 characters) are invoked for activist purposes (423).

Whereas Love argues for the potential of microanalysis as a “political resource” (441-2) used to “document but also protest the social status quo,” (424) I am specifically interested in the shifting of scale between anecdotal observation and political analysis. The shifting scale Love identifies is necessary to the descriptive and analytic purchase of microanalysis – a statement that equally applies to anecdote. Moreover, not only do Love and Nelson share an interest in the impact of small-scale forms (particularly as they emerge within Citizen) but Nelson’s comments about anecdote in The White Review resound with Love’s larger argument. This is demonstrated by their similar expression of anxiety about what becomes of the small-scale observation of daily life once it is remediated via textual capture. Where Love frames this anxiety as the possible textual “reduplication of the world,” Nelson articulates it as the dead-end of anecdote (428).  

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Drawing on the work of Love, I argue that in *The Argonauts* Nelson deploys a form of microanalysis within the aesthetic framework of life writing. This occurs through the autobiographical mobilisation of “anecdotal form”, which registers the small-scale interactions and affects of the everyday as experienced by Nelson.\(^{31}\) Using Love’s example, I read selected anecdotes within *The Argonauts* through a microanalytic framework, paying particular attention to the question of whether or not Nelson’s fragmentary forms displace or intervene in the social conditions they critique.

**Queer Maternity**

Early in *The Argonauts*, Nelson tells an anecdote about a response to her pregnancy in a familial setting. Nelson is in her kitchen having coffee with a friend. The friend grabs a mug that has been gifted to the family by Nelson’s mother. It features a photo of Nelson who is pregnant, Harry and their stepson at Christmas time ready to go to a performance of *The Nutcracker*. The friend exclaims, “Wow . . . I’ve never seen anything so heteronormative in all my life” (*Argo*, 13). Nelson meditates on this comment with a string of rhetorical questions:

> But what about it is the essence of heteronormativity? That my mother made a mug on a boojie service like Snapfish? That we’re clearly participating, or acquiescing into participating, in a long tradition of families being photographed at holiday time in their holiday best? That my mother made me the mug, in part to indicate that she recognizes and accepts my tribe as family? What about my pregnancy – is that inherently heteronormative? Or is the presumed opposition of queerness and procreation (or, to put a finer edge on it, maternity) more a reactionary embrace of how things have shaken down for queers than the mark of

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some ontological truth? As more queers have kids, will the presumed opposition simply wither away? Will you miss it?

Is there something inherently queer about pregnancy itself, insofar as it profoundly alters one’s “normal” state, and occasions a radical intimacy with – and radical alienation from – one’s body? How can an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolize or enact the ultimate conformity? Or is this just another disqualification of anything tied too closely to the female animal from the privileged term (in this case, nonconformity, or radicality)? What about the fact that Harry is neither male nor female? I’m a special – a two for one, his character Valentine explains in By Hook or By Crook. (Argo, 13-14)

In this extract Nelson appeals to her personal experience as a means of evidence for the allegorical exposition of queer maternity that she advances. In doing so, Nelson shows how the minutiae of daily life – in this case, a passing comment – can be the impetus for a cultural critique about the status of maternity within queer politics. For instance, Nelson takes the friend’s comment as an indictment of how queer maternity is overlooked within radical queer contexts because it is unable to be seen as anything beyond its attachment to the signifier of the normative, which is here infused with derision. This is demonstrated when Nelson points out how her embodiment as a pregnant woman and subsequent motherhood bars her from accessing the here privileged status of radicality. Crucially, Nelson wants us to understand that critiques of normativity can be sexist and consequently, they can replicate what they critique. Put another way, Nelson levels us to question the anti-sexist commitments of radical queer politics when they coincide with acts of contempt for maternal embodiment as just another indication of normativity at work.
On a similar note later in the text, Nelson questions the “binary of the normative/transgressive” by claiming that “no one set of practices or relations has the monopoly on the so-called radical, or the so-called normative” (*Argo*, 73-4). Such a sentiment is then matched by Nelson’s citation of Susan Fraiman who is likewise invested in disrupting “the tired binary that places femininity, reproduction and normativity on one side and masculinity, sexuality and queer resistance on the other” (*Argo*, 75). Nelson advocates for Fraiman’s notion of the “sodomitical mother”, which is articulated by Fraiman as the mother who has access, “even as a mother” to “non-normative, nonprocreative sexuality, to sexuality in excess of the dutifully instrumental” (*Argo*, 69). The shift from the minor narrative unit of the mug anecdote to the theoretical mode used by Susan Fraiman exemplifies the way *The Argonauts* moves between the microanalysis of daily observation and the macro frames of social theory.

However, in *The Argonauts*, the use of conversations and interactions as a form of daily small-scale observation is troubled by the gap between the descriptive depth of Nelson’s own responses and the lack of description given of the speaker, even in the form of speculation. While literary texts routinely thrive by setting up an unplumbable chasm around the unreliable narrator, *The Argonauts* sidesteps this epistemological tripwire by removing the comment from its interpersonal context insofar as we are given no further details about the friend or the friendship. The removal of details about the friend works to enable Nelson to think through

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32 The construction of maternity within queer theory has been critiqued by Rachel Epstein who observes that “queer theory tends to separate queer sexuality from the maternal.” Rachel Epstein, “Butches With Babies: Reconfiguring Gender and Motherhood,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 6, no. 2 (2002): 51. Susan Fraiman elaborates that “when women occupy the place of “other” within queer discourse it is frequently because they occupy the place of “mother”; and because “mother,” in turn, is reduced to biology, heterosexuality, traditional family, coercive normativity.” Susan Fraiman, *Cool Men and The Second Sex* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 129.
what the comment in its extracted form says of queer politics. However, this limits our understanding of how the friend is similarly or differentially constituted through the culture Nelson describes.

Nevertheless this lack of description does not stall the allegorical exposition about queer maternity that Nelson puts forth through the mug anecdote. This exposition proffers that a preoccupation with fixing queer maternity to normativity can be a route for its dismissal, which significantly relies upon an investment in upholding the division and hierarchisation between the normative and the transgressive. This is one way in which Nelson’s anecdotes use micro-description in combination with micro-citation to register the contradictions of binary logic and the supposedly paradoxical subject positions they produce – most notably, the queer mother.

Anecdotes about maternity in *The Argonauts* extend beyond domestic spaces and into academic and literary spaces. For instance, at work when Nelson bumps into a “superior” at the cafeteria, he pays for Nelson’s lunch before assuring her with a wink that her research interests will return post-baby (*Argo*, 38). The text then takes us to a panel discussion for Nelson’s book *The Art of Cruelty* at which a “well-known playwright” asks Nelson:

*I can’t help but notice that you’re with child, which leads me to the question – how did you handle working on all this dark material [sadism, masochism, cruelty, violence and so on] in your condition?* (*Argo*, 91; original emphasis)

These two interactions further emphasise the conflicting reception of maternal embodiment in which the cultural validation for having a baby intersects with sexist invalidation. Nelson explicitly argues that pregnancy can amplify this sexism when she describes the comment by the well-known playwright as creating a “spectacle of that wild oxymoron, *the pregnant*
woman who thinks. Which is really just a pumped-up version of that more general oxymoron, a woman who thinks” (Argo, 91).

Nelson’s small-scale snapshots of maternity typically cite strangers who are mostly hospital and service staff. For instance, Nelson reports that during her numerous hospital visits she is given roughly “twenty-five ultra sounds photos of his [Iggy’s] in-utero penis and testicles” from “a chirpy, blond pony-tailed technician” who routinely exclaims “Boy, he’s sure proud of his stuff” or “He really likes to show it off!” to which Nelson writes, “Just let him wheel around in his sac for Christ’s sake, I thought” (Argo, 94). The descriptive precision of social scenes is conveyed through attention to gesture as well as reported conversation. While travelling, Nelson observes that “on more than one occasion, a service member of the airport literally saluted me as I shuffled past,” which leads to her reflection “so this is the seduction of normalcy, I thought as I smiled back, compromised and radiant” (Argo, 89-90).

While citing interactions with strangers has the capacity to illuminate Nelson’s experience of pregnancy, the anecdotes involving strangers only secure their impact by keeping these strangers as two-dimensional figures. On one hand, this fits Nelson’s purposes of thinking through what these comments about pregnancy reveal of the broader culture through a speaker. On the other hand, the effect can be to withhold the potential of knowledge emerging from strangers who are implicated in Nelson’s concerns. For instance, in spite of Nelson’s narrative interest in the politics of care, people who work in paid-care are mainly represented as sources of ignorance, or prompts befitting Nelson’s critique. Rather than discounting the significance of these small-scale interactions, I point this out in order to suggest that a pattern occurs in the text whereby Nelson primarily reserves citational authority for feminist and queer affiliated writers, artists and theorists. As such, Nelson’s
anecdotes derive their authority through proximity to figures who validate the particularities of her personal concerns through imbuing them with larger social context. Yet, securing the authority of the anecdotes by deferring to those with artistic or theoretical capital means that other potential sources of alternative knowledge, like paid-care workers, are overlooked by being negatively invoked.

However circumscribed inclusion in citational authority is, the citations also serve purposes beyond supporting Nelson’s anecdotal microanalysis. Most notably, the citations allow Nelson to stage her self-disclosure through scenes of queer theoretical attachment and disavowal. This adds intellectual and affective depth to scenes that would otherwise read simply as self-disclosure. Certainly, in an interview with Adam Fitzgerald, Nelson has described the citations in The Argonauts as a “scene of family-making.”33 As such, The Argonauts presents us with Nelson’s kinship network (Harry, Iggy, her stepson, her mother and various friends). Its other articulation of kinship emerges in the expression of affection for writers and theorists. In particular, Nelson narrates her affinity for the work of D.W. Winnicott, Roland Barthes and Eve Sedgwick. For instance, Winnicott is adored (Argo, 43), Barthes’ text The Neutral is called an “anthem” (Argo, 112) and Sedgwick’s “pluralize and specify” is described as a “mantra” (Argo, 62). The adoration for the work of these writers as licensed by the aesthetic mode, builds an authorial persona that toys with the scholarly distance attached to the conventions of citation.

Nelson makes the link between citation and kinship overt when she labels the figures cited throughout The Argonauts, from Catherine Opie to James Schuyler, as her “many gendered-

mothers” (Argo, 57). This invocation extends the text’s investigation of queer maternity from
the experiential to the figurative and operates on two levels. First, it displays affiliation to
feminist and queer affiliated writers, artists and theorists. Second, it positions the maternal as
a recuperated source of knowledge. Rather than being of the proverbial “mother knows best”
variety, this maternal knowledge detaches maternity from gender and bloodline. Nelson
borrows the “many gendered-mother” moniker from Dana Ward’s poem “A Kentucky of
Mothers” in which Ward lists his own “many gendered-mothers” ranging from Allen
Ginsberg to Ella Fitzgerald (Argo, 57-8). Nelson understands this poem as “constructing an
eccstatic matriarchal cosmology while also defetishizing the maternal, even emptying the
category out” (Argo, 58).

Unlike Ward, Nelson is not exclusively engaged with “emptying the category [of the mother]
out” since many of the narratives in The Argonauts insist on the specificity of embodied
maternal relations. These include Nelson’s self-representation as a mother, her relationship
with her own mother and accounts of Harry’s relationship with both his birth and adoptive
mothers. Moreover, in interviews, Nelson has commented on how gender fluidity puts
pressure on discourses of motherhood and fatherhood. Harry, she reports, “doesn’t see
himself reflected in versions of motherhood but also doesn’t really see himself reflected in
versions of fatherhood but still feels himself very much to be a parent.” Nelson later
describes The Argonauts as an attempt to discuss “non-gendered points of care” alongside
“biological maternity” without the one usurping the other.

The implications of using familial metaphors to describe knowledge circulation have been critiqued within queer theory. For instance, in *The Queer Art of Failure* Jack Halberstam describes familial metaphors (particularly those invested in knowledge being “passed down” from mother to daughter) as installing an “Oedipal frame” at their centre that forecloses the “potential future of new knowledge formations” and “models of thinking” for feminist and queer politics.\(^{36}\) Halberstam helps us understand how familial metaphors (here configured as maternal citations) run the risk of fixing maternity and knowledge to one another in ways that diminish the variability of both. Elsewhere, Julianne Pidduck describes queer cultural production as having the potential to “make strange the grammar of kinship.”\(^{37}\) While the “many gendered-mothers” is a familial metaphor, its invocation of plurality and difference allows us to rethink maternity as a category, thus holding the door open for kinship to be made strange.

**The Couple**

Anecdote and citation provide the foundation for Nelson’s account of her relationship with Harry Dodge, which encompasses the beginnings of their relationship, moving in together and getting married. There are three anecdotes in *The Argonauts* that specifically foreground the couple. In the first, Nelson provides a small-scale entry point into the way gender is disciplined in public spaces. Nelson relates an anecdote of the family buying pumpkins for Halloween:

> We’d been given a little red wagon to put our pumpkins in as we tramped around the field. We’d haggled over the price, we’d oooed and aahed at the life-sized mechanical zombie removing his head. We’d been given freebie minipumpkins


for our cute baby. Then, the credit card. The guy paused for a long moment, then said, “This is her card, right?” — pointing at me. I almost felt sorry for him, he was so desperate to normalize the moment. I should have said yes, but I was worried I would open up a new avenue of trouble (never the scofflaw— yet I know I have what it takes to put my body on the line, if and when it comes down to it; this knowledge is a hot red shape inside me). We just froze in the way we freeze until Harry said, “It’s my card.” Long pause, sidelong stare. A shadow of violence usually drifts over the scene. “It’s complicated,” Harry finally said, puncturing the silence. Eventually, the man spoke. “No actually, it’s not,” he said, handing back the card. “Not complicated at all.” (Argo, 89)

Here, the typical brevity of a transactional exchange is elongated by tension which interrupts the formerly benign and festive mood. It bears noting that in this anecdote the dialogue is minimal and the narration centres on gestures and silences. Where the cashier pauses, points and stares, Maggie and Harry freeze and pause. Such descriptive precision is imperative to conveying how the disciplining of gender circulates in the unspoken as well as the spoken. The connection between the reported interaction and the quotidian, moreover, is displayed by the basic fact that the scene involves a banal commercial transaction. Crucially, it is not only the setting that makes the interaction everyday but also the inference of the interaction’s repetition. For instance, when Nelson remarks, “a shadow of violence usually drifts over the scene,” she implies that the interaction is a variation on previously experienced encounters (Argo, 89; emphasis mine). In this way, the scene is portrayed as a routinised, non-event, yet the social violence of gender regulation embedded within the encounter derives part of its negative impact from the sense of imminent repetition.
This anecdote also demonstrates how the aesthetic mode is positioned to register the subjective interiority and affects of these small-scale interactions as the textual capture of the anecdote exhibits Nelson’s multiple and contradictory responses to the scene. Nelson describes feeling borderline pity (“I almost felt sorry for him”), hesitation, regret, anxiety (“I should have said yes but I was worried”), loyalty and defiance (“I know I have what it takes to put my body on the line”) (Argo, 89). In spite of the brevity of the anecdote, Nelson is still able to make the depth of her ambivalence legible to the reader. Yet, the fact that Nelson is the reader’s access point to the scene also has other particular effects, the most notable of which is that Harry’s perspective is withheld from the reader. This constitutes a limit to Nelson’s anecdote that poses the question of what insights Nelson might effectively bring to or claim from the scene. Certainly the tone of Nelson’s narration positions the reader to accept her insights as authoritative because of her presence in the scene and her intimate proximity to Harry. Thus, in spite of the lack of Harry’s narrative perspective, Nelson uses this anecdote to explicitly disclose and implicitly critique the ways in which the daily life of the couple becomes entangled in the disciplining of gender in public spaces.

The second anecdote that centres on the couple is Nelson’s account of their marriage early in the text. Nelson characterises her marriage to Harry as an impromptu decision that the couple make in response to the likelihood of Proposition 8 passing (Argo, 23).38 Nelson describes the political atmosphere of the moment through noting the campaign signs the couple pass while driving to Norwalk City Hall where they intend to marry. For instance,

38 Tony E. Adams explains Proposition 8: “In November 2000, voters of California approved an initiative to define marriage as a coupling of one man and one woman. In May 2008, the state Supreme Court ruled against the initiative by calling the right to marry a fundamental right—a right that cannot be denied to a couple solely because of each person’s sex. In June 2008, Proposition 8 emerged to give voters a chance to overturn the ruling, and, in November 2008, voters approved Proposition 8, thus overturning the Supreme Court decision.” Tony E. Adams, “Frames of Homosexuality: Comparing Los Angeles Times’ Coverage of California’s Proposition 6 (1978) and Proposition 8 (2008),” Sexuality and Culture 17, no. 2 (2013): 219-20.
churches are adorned with “one man + one woman: how God wants it” placards, while suburban homes feature “YES ON PROP 8 signs” (Argo, 23). Readers are already familiar with the “YES ON PROP 8” signs as a few pages prior Nelson describes that in the fall the yellow signs were ubiquitous:

The sign depicted four stick figures raising their hands to the sky, in a paroxysm of joy – the joy, I suppose, of heteronormativity, here indicated by the fact that one of the stick figures sported a triangle skirt. (What is that triangle, anyway? My twat?) (Eileen Myles) PROTECT CALIFORNIA CHILDREN! the stick figures cheered. (Argo, 10-11)

As it turns out, the couple leave Norwalk still unmarried because of the “epic line” of “mostly fags and dykes of all ages” queued up to get married in addition to the intimidating media presence at the scene (Argo, 23-4). The couple immediately set off for The Hollywood Chapel where they get married in a hurried ceremony at the end of which they “were undone. We wept, besotted with our luck” (Argo, 25). However, “By the end of the day, 52 percent of California voters had voted to pass Prop 8, thus halting “same-sex” marriages across the state, reversing the conditions of our felicity” (Argo, 25).

This anecdote captures the micro-narrative of the couple’s marriage within the macro narrative of Proposition 8 and the broader context of gay marriage. By rendering her relation to the broader politics of gay marriage anecdotally, Nelson articulates how large-scale political rhetoric manifests within the small-scale of individual lives. For example, Nelson reflects on the couple’s reaction to the likelihood of Prop 8’s passage with the line “we were surprised at our shock, as it revealed a passive, naive trust that the arc of the moral universe, however long, tends toward justice. But really justice has no coordinates, no teleology” (Argo, 23). The description of their marriage is consistently thrown into relief by anti-gay
politics and ordinary domestic activity. For instance, the Prop 8 signs are what Nelson sees on her drive to and from work (Argo, 10), the couple realise that the bill is most likely going to pass while making their morning hot drinks (Argo, 23) and after they finally get married, they have to go pick up their child from day care (Argo, 25). Yet, this ordinariness only serves to highlight the extraordinary precarity of gay marriage around the time of Prop 8. As Nelson remarks that “by the end of the day” their marriage had been made invalid (Argo, 25).

Just as Nelson is concerned with the status of queer maternity within queer politics, she is likewise interested in the status of gay marriage within queer politics. In the text, Nelson’s critique of marriage reads less as a critique of the institution and more as a critique of the political climate in which she is caught between the conservative and radical queer positions on marriage. For instance, Nelson represents this as an impossible double bind, quipping, “Poor marriage! Off we went to kill it (unforgivable). Or re-inforce it (unforgivable)” (Argo, 23). Nelson continues:

There’s something truly strange about living in a historical moment in which the conservative anxiety and despair about queers bringing down civilization and its institutions (marriage, most notably) is met by the anxiety and despair so many queers feel about the failure or incapacity of queerness to bring down civilization and its institutions, and their frustration with the assimilationist, unthinkingly neoliberal bent of the mainstream GLBTQ+ movement, which has spent fine coin begging entrance into two historically repressive structures: marriage and the military. (Argo, 26)

In his blog Conversational Reading, Scott Esposito takes Nelson to task for her statements on marriage arguing that, although these characterisations are “pleasingly ironic,” they are also
Esposito’s primary criticism is that Nelson “reaps the rhetorical benefits of the easy statement on the hot-button issue, but she never follows up with the much riskier and more difficult matters of digging into the premises of said statement.”

Esposito’s comments are useful for the way they demarcate the possible problems that attend *The Argonauts*’ fragmentary forms, one of which is that their brevity potentially enables Nelson to evade rigour in her cultural critique. I suggest that Esposito’s observations allow us to reconfigure an understanding of Nelson’s critique in terms of depth and its relationship to form and audience. While, Esposito’s observations are noteworthy, they misinterpret how the reading public of *The Argonauts* is circumscribed. For instance, as previously discussed, *The Argonauts* orients itself towards a broad reading public and as such the critique of marriage may be introductory precisely because for some readers it serves as an introduction to a broader issue. Second, the form of *The Argonauts* licenses the depth of Nelson’s critique. That is to say that, rather than suggesting that the critique is an evasive manoeuvre, its brevity is aligned with an aesthetic framework in which critique has different parameters than those of the forms alluded to by Esposito. Nelson’s anecdotal mode of critique illuminates through marital self-disclosure the difficult positioning of queer individuals within a political climate in which the desire to get married is deemed “unforgiveable” from both conservative and radical queer standpoints.

Nelson elaborates on this point in *The White Review* by explaining that she does not think it is “effective” to portray people who get married as “those assimilationists who are selling us

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40 Esposito, “A Generally Mixed Response,” *Conversational Reading*. 
down the river” particularly when the emphasis could be “on more structural things.” Reinforcing how such a sentiment manifests at the micro-scale of her own intimate life, Nelson remarks that “I don’t see what Harry and I would gain by not having legal custody of both of our children, while we try and fight the good fight.” Nelson fully acknowledges her ambivalent political placement in relation to marriage by saying “I completely believe in abolishing marriage, and I also got married – it’s that kind of paradigm.” These comments are significant since they are a testament to the ways in which Nelson extrapolates on the text by continually mediating its meaning in spaces outside it. Taken in conjunction with the anecdotal representation of marriage in *The Argonauts*, Nelson positions readers to apprehend the ways in which personal decisions about marriage are informed by factors other than abstract political beliefs.

The third anecdote that gives insight into *The Argonauts*’ representation of the couple occurs midway through the text when Nelson recounts how she and Harry go to Fort Lauderdale for a week so that Harry can have top surgery (*Argo*, 79). Nelson explains that at this juncture, she is “four months pregnant” and Harry is “six months on T” (*Argo*, 79). Nelson notes, “You pass as a guy; I, as pregnant” (*Argo*, 83). This prompts us to ask what it means for a genderqueer relationship to be read as heterosexual. Rather than thinking this question through exclusively as a passing narrative that angles us towards a visibility-erasure nexus, Nelson stresses the contingencies of any embodied change:

> Our waiter cheerfully tells us about his family, expresses delight in ours. On the surface, it may have seemed as though your body was becoming more and more “male,” mine, more and more “female.” But that’s not how it felt on the inside.

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On the inside, we were two human animals undergoing transformations beside each other, bearing each other loose witness. In other words, we were aging. 

(Argo, 83)

Of note in this passage is the way that Maggie and Harry’s respective embodied changes spin out from the specificity of pregnancy and taking testosterone to the more constant, macro narrative of aging. This is worth pausing over since in spite of the multiple narratives of change The Argonauts concerns itself with, whether bodily, temporal or circumstantial; the text occasionally considers, but rarely attaches itself to, any negative affects we might associate with change. Rather, the text continually folds in on the central love plot of the couple as a point of narrative closure.

In terms of citation, this central love plot is authenticated by references to Harry. Towards the end of The Argonauts, Nelson’s narration of giving birth to Iggy is intercut with Harry’s narration of being with his mother as she dies in a nursing home. Harry writes, “She was in the doorway of all worlds and I was in the doorway too. . . . I never wanted it to end” (Argo, 130). The inclusion of Harry’s writing marks the longest citation in The Argonauts. Nelson has explained in an interview with Vincent Scarpa that the excerpt was extracted from an email Harry wrote to friends at the time.44 This is exemplary of the way Nelson extracts and repurposes writing from elsewhere for aesthetic ends in The Argonauts. In this case, it demonstrates a technique through which life writing can shift the privacy of disclosure between select intimates outward to a reading public. It is also noteworthy for being the moment at which Nelson collapses the distinction between a cited writer and a beloved person. This extends into other citations of Harry, including reported conversations between Nelson and Harry and references to Harry’s art.

44 Vincent Scarpa, “It is Idle to Fault a Net For Having Holes,” Tin House.
Yet, the implicit and ongoing reference to Harry lies primarily in his assumed correspondence with the beloved “you” of conventional poetic address. This mode of address is seamless at some points and jarring at others. For instance, when Nelson writes, “in your early thirties you went on a hunt for your birth mother” (Argo, 138), the positioning of the addressee and the implied reader is more incongruent than in a line like “you’ve punctured my solitude” (Argo, 5). Whereas the former quote reads like a biography of Harry, the latter is evocative of the privacy assumed in a love letter. The Argonauts continually oscillates between these modes. Yet, the beloved “you” of conventional poetic address is maintained, in part, to create the effect of Nelson speaking to, rather than about Harry, even when she is invariably performing the former in order to do the latter. This is most noticeably marked in the final pages of the text where Nelson provides the reader with more details of Harry’s life. For instance, “over time you became Harriet “Harry” Dodge: an attempt to conjure the feeling of and, or but. Now you are simply Harry” (Argo, 137).

Harry’s writing marks another instance in which citation is used in the service of narrative authority. Whereby the presence of other voices in the text could be understood to undercut Nelson’s narrative authority, in actuality, they secure it through alerting the reader to its limitations. For instance, Harry’s citations provide us with a differing entry point into the love plot of The Argonauts as well as his own representation. The invocation of Harry throughout the text is equally conducive to Nelson’s self-disclosure. As life writing theorists Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson observe, “the routing of a self known through its relational others undermines the understanding of life narrative as a bounded story of the unique, individuated narrating subject.” In other words, the production of subjectivity in autobiography relies on

the citation of others because self-knowledge is usually, if not always, relational. *The Argonauts* exemplifies this circuitry through its embrace of the citation.

Caretaking

In *The Argonauts*, the specific narrative strands of queer maternity are also folded into a meditation on the meaning of caretaking in general. As I will go on to demonstrate, in the text caretaking is framed around universal and particular iterations of dependence. While *The Argonauts* affirms caretaking for its attendant joys, Nelson also notes the finitude of maternal caretaking. Below, I trace two anecdotes and one extended citation that centre on caretaking.

Part of Nelson’s project within *The Argonauts* is to put pressure on the cultural understanding and valuation of caretaking, particularly maternal care. Such a project demands that Nelson demonstrate the depth and necessity of caretaking, which she achieves through a reflection on the interplay between self-reliance and dependence. However, the anecdote that Nelson deploys for this allegorical exposition does not directly involve maternity but rather concerns her time working at a bar in New York. Nelson uses her observations of the internal micro-politics of this workplace to think through alcohol dependence. Using her favoured form of micro-description, Nelson tells us about a range of regular drinkers including “the silent owner who had to be carried into the back of a taxi at dawn after he’d blacked out from Rolling Rocks and shots of Stoli that we’d served him,” the “punk Swedes” who drank “vodka dissolved in iced coffee,” the man who would whip “a fellow diner” with his belt after “a few Hurricanes” and “the woman who left her baby in a car seat under the bar one night and forgot about it” (*Argo*, 101). Here is Nelson’s reflection on these examples in its entirety:
The ease with which I deemed myself together by comparison, purchased me a few more years of believing alcohol more precious than toxic to me. 

*The self without sympathetic attachments is either a fiction or a lunatic.* . . . [Yet] dependence is scorned even in intimate relationships, as though dependence were incompatible with self-reliance rather than the only thing that makes it possible (Adam Phillips / Barbara Taylor).

I learned this scorn from my own mother; perhaps it laced my milk. I therefore have to be on the alert for a tendency to treat other people’s needs as repulsive. Corollary habit: deriving the bulk of my self-worth from a feeling of hypercompetence, an irrational but fervent belief in my near total self-reliance.

*You’re a great student because you don’t have any baggage,* a teacher once told me, at which moment the subterfuge of my life felt complete.

One of the gifts of recognizing oneself in thrall to a substance is the perforation of such subterfuge. In place of an exhausting autonomy, there is the blunt admittance of dependence, and its subsequent relief. I will always aspire to contain my shit as best I can, but I am no longer interested in hiding my dependencies in an effort to appear superior to those who are more visibly undone or aching. Most people decide at some point that it is better . . . to be enthralled with what is impoverished or abusive than not be enthralled at all and so to lose the condition of one’s being and becoming (Butler). I’m glad not to be there right now, but I’m also glad to have been there, to know how it is. (Argo, 101-102)

In this passage, Nelson questions the commonplace understanding of self-reliance and dependence as oppositional rather than interrelated terms. The heart of Nelson’s self-disclosure is the narration of her tendency to valorise her own self-reliance and downplay her
dependence, whether that is dependence on substances or on others. Nelson’s notion of dependence slips between dependence on a substance and dependence on other people, yet, rather than conflating the two, Nelson uses the specificity of alcohol dependence as an entry point into the more general dependence on others. Putting the bar anecdote in concert with the citation from Phillips and Taylor, Nelson articulates how the recognition of dependence on others enables, rather than negates, self-reliance.

Rather than suggesting that this over-valuation of independence is an idiosyncratic tendency, Nelson recasts her experiences within a larger cultural framework. Deploying the anecdotal mode, Nelson interrogates how self-reliance and dependence intersect in her experience of the workplace, just as she more obliquely uses it to explore relations of dependence in familial relations and academic spaces. Another way in which Nelson puts forth her account of the mutuality between self-reliance and dependence is through elaborating on how her affective relation towards these terms has altered across her lifetime. For instance, Nelson describes her former belief in “near total self-reliance” as involving judgement about the needs of others (scorn, repulsion, superiority) and deception about her own needs (hiding, subterfuge). In tandem with this, Nelson describes self-reliance as being in the same circuit as self-worth. The line, “You’re a great student because you don’t have any baggage, a teacher once told me, at which moment the subterfuge of my life felt complete,” is of note for its exemplary compression of an anecdote and a citation into a single sentence which underscores the emotional cost of being seen as self-reliant (Argo, 102). However, Nelson concludes, “I am no longer interested in hiding my dependencies in an effort to appear superior” (Argo, 102). In this self-reflection Nelson deploys anecdotal self-disclosure to critically detach self-reliance from pride and dependence from shame.
While the affective reframing of these terms is noteworthy, of equal interest in this anecdote is the articulation of the slow movement between Nelson’s recognition of the material reality of dependence and its absorption into her self-perception. In the case of her alcohol dependence, Nelson attributes this lag in conscious acknowledgement to comparisons she made between herself and the patrons of the bar. In the case of dependence on others, Nelson points to her mother as the source of her reluctant acceptance of need in herself and others: “I learned this scorn [of dependence] from my own mother” (Argo, 101). Thus, Nelson presents contempt for dependence as something capable of being learned through dependent relationships, particularly maternal ones. Nelson uses this anecdotal reflection to contradict in writing the seemingly common sense claim that independence is a positive value in its own right. Rather, Nelson reveals independence as a complicated disavowal of need.

This anecdotal microanalysis is simultaneously attended by the compressed description of other people. Most notably, Nelson uses the micro-description of other people’s dependence to arrive at macro-observations of her own. This is most clearly exemplified through the detail she provides of the patrons at the bar. In spite of this specificity, the impression is given that these figures are also interchangeable. For instance, Nelson ends the descriptive list of the patron’s perceived dependencies with an ellipsis, which emphasises that she could go on to list innumerable similar micro-descriptions of dependence observed within this bar. We might be inclined to understand this descriptive compression as reducing these people to caricatures, with narrative complexity being reserved for Nelson’s account of herself. However, in attaching experiences of dependence to herself, in addition to others, Nelson highlights the point that need and dependence are not unique to particular individuals, but a shared condition. This furthers Nelson’s argument for the social value of caretaking across the text.
The Argonauts’ affirmation of care relies on citations of contemporary queer art. For example, towards the middle of The Argonauts, Nelson reviews Puppies and Babies, a 2012 A.L. Steiner exhibition. Nelson describes the exhibition as “an anarchic, colorful, blissed-out collection of snapshots, culled from Steiner’s personal archive, of friends in various states of public and private intimacy with titular creatures” (Argo, 70). Significantly, it is through representing this exhibition in words that Nelson makes claims about queer family and caretaking. Nelson admires the exhibition for its portrayal of “sodomitical maternity” and its “joy-swirl of sodomitical parenthood, caretaking of all kinds, and interspecies love” (Argo, 70-1). As she elaborates:

Indeed, one of the gifts of genderqueer family making – and animal loving – is the revelation of caretaking as detachable from – and attachable to – any gender, any sentient being. . . .

Some of the subjects of Puppies and Babies may not identify as queer, but it doesn’t matter: the installation queers them. By which I mean to say that it partakes 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 – and that it presents queer family making as an umbrella category under which baby making might be a subset, rather than the other way around. It reminds us that any bodily experience can be made new and strange, that nothing we do in this life need have a lid crammed on it, that no one set of practices or relations has the monopoly on the so-called radical or the so-called normative.

(Argo, 72-3)

Using Puppies and Babies as a critical prompt, Nelson schematises having children within the queer family umbrella. Indeed, Nelson puts “queer family making” at the apex of this
schema, rather than having children. This defers to the “long history of queers constructing their own families” by maintaining that biological ties are not the determining factor in people accessing the term “family.” At the same time, however, Nelson maintains that queers who do have children need not be disqualified from the queer umbrella. This critique is continuous with Nelson’s earlier dissection of the erasure of queer maternity within radical queer politics. With her claim that “no one set of practices has the monopoly on the so-called radical or the so-called normative,” Nelson does not make a call for the outright rejection of the “radical” and “normative” as terms, but for the loosening of their parameters. This can also be seen through Nelson’s observation that “any bodily experience can be made new and strange”, which recalls her earlier suggestion in the text that pregnancy might be considered “inherently queer” due to its radical alienation and intimacy from one’s usual embodiment (Argo, 13).

Yet in the passage above it is also clear that questions of the radical and the normative are secondary to Nelson’s consideration of caretaking. Nelson observes a myriad of features that render caretaking remarkable to her. First, she admires the social elasticity of caretaking insofar as she understands it as having a flexible relationality in that it can attach to any subject, including the non-human. Within her meditation on Puppies and Babies, she cites a New York Times Mother’s Day article, which argues both that childrearing is a boring practice and that motherhood occasions “terrible writing” (Argo, 71). This leads to Nelson’s second observation via Puppies and Babies, which is that caretaking can be attended by its own joys.

Nelson elaborates on this sentiment elsewhere in The Argonauts writing that, “so far as I can tell, most worthwhile pleasures on this earth slip between gratifying another and gratifying
oneself. Some would call that an ethics” (Argo, 96). Of even more significance is the way The Argonauts achieves final closure on caretaking with the last line reading, “I know we’re still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our care, its ongoing song” (Argo, 143). In an interview with Olivia Laing, Nelson underscores this point when she describes how The Argonauts is concerned with “presumptions about care being a diminishment of freedom and the ways in which that did not seem to be the case.”

Nelson’s self-disclosures tender that caretaking is not at odds with self-fulfilment. Beyond this, Nelson also suggests that caretaking can be an ethics and a means for social freedom. As before, the Puppies and Babies passage is exemplary of how Nelson relies on citation, as much as anecdote, to perform cultural critique. This particular cultural critique intervenes in two directions. First, since caretaking is feminised through its associations with mothering, Nelson’s affirmation of caretaking speaks back to sexist diminishments. Second, Nelson problematises the fixing of caretaking roles to certain bodies (mainly those of women), with an affirmation of caretaking that extends to “all kinds” (Argo, 71).

The affirmation of caretaking in The Argonauts coexists with acceptance of its limits. Nelson exemplifies this through an anecdote about expressing milk combined with a citation of Kaja Silverman’s concept of maternal finitude (Argo, 95-7). In Nelson’s words, Silverman argues that “the turn to a paternal God comes on the heels of the child’s recognition that the mother cannot protect against all harm” (Argo, 95). Such a realisation leads to disappointment and rage from the child toward the mother (Argo, 95). Silverman argues that one way to counter the culturally pervasive but nevertheless false conception of boundless maternal care is to create more “enabling representations of maternal finitude” (Argo, 96). This involves

teaching the child the boundaries of subjectivity, namely “this is where you end and others begin” (*Argo* 95).

The primary anecdotal mobilisation of maternal finitude emerges two pages after the Silverman citation when Nelson discusses milk expression. Immediately prior to this, Nelson references another A.L. Steiner photograph that captures Layla Childs “pumping milk from her breasts via a “hands free” pumping bra and double electric pump” (*Argo*, 99). Nelson continues:

Pumping milk is, for many women, a sharply private activity. It can also be physically and emotionally challenging, as it reminds the nursing mother of her animal status: just another mammal, milk being siphoned from its glands. Beyond photographs in breast pump manuals (and lactation porn), however, images of milk expression are really nowhere to be found. Phrases such as *colostrum*, *letdown* and *hindmilk* arrive in one’s life like hieroglyphs from the land of the lost. . . .In Steiner’s intimate portrait of Childs, the proposed transmission of fluids is about nourishment. *I almost can’t imagine.*

And yet – while pumping milk may be about nourishment, it isn’t really about communion. A human mother expresses milk because sometimes she can’t be there to nurse her baby, either by choice or by necessity. Pumping is thus an admission of distance, of maternal finitude. But it is a separation, a finitude, suffused with best intentions. Milk or no milk, this is often the best we’ve got to give.

Once I suggested that I had written half a book drunk, the other half sober. Here I estimate that about nine-tenths of the words in this 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. (*Argo*, 99-100)

Whereas previously Nelson puts representational pressure on the queer mother and the
sodomitical mother, in this anecdote we encounter the finite mother and the mother who
writes. Nelson uses this anecdote to align her experience of pumping milk as an everyday
articulation of Silverman’s concept of maternal finitude. There is a noticeable pronoun
slippage in the anecdote. Nelson starts in the mode of distant third person observation
(“pumping milk is, for many women”), before moving to first person plural (“this is often the
best we’ve got to give”), before settling in to the autobiographical “I”. The result of this
narrowing in is the paradoxical enlargement of the anecdotal observation to the general
recognition that all maternal care is finite.

In this anecdote, Nelson foregrounds her subject position as a mother who writes and thus
returns us to the perceived paradox between the maternal and the intellectual. Nelson rallies
against this earlier in *The Argonauts* via Roland Barthes’ comment that “the writer is
someone who plays with his mother’s body” (*Argo*, 40). To this psychoanalytically inspired
notion she responds that “sometimes the writer is also the mother” (*Argo*, 40). Placing
routinised practices of maternal care (expressing milk) into the same anecdotal frame as a
routinised writing practice (typing words) reconciles the maternal with the intellectual by
making legible the ordinary subject position of the mother who writes. Nelson’s observation
that “words piled into one machine, milk siphoned out by another,” characterises both acts as
embodied experiences externally mediated by their respective technologies. The allegorical
exposition of this anecdote collapses the perceived distinction between writing as the
profound and pumping milk as the abject by characterising them both as everyday entangled events.

Although milk expression and writing are both enmeshed in relationality insofar as they are for others, in this anecdote Nelson highlights their solitary practice. Whereas *The Argonauts* usually traffics in small-scale interactions with others in public and domestic space, here the microanalysis occurs in the descriptive absence of others. We can therefore conclude that the narrative and analytic tools that *The Argonauts* develops to account for the social, also have purchase on examinations of the self. Overall, *The Argonauts* engages the micro-observations of everyday anecdote (the New York bar, pumping milk) in conjunction with macro theoretical and aesthetic frames derived from other sources (notably A.L. Steiner and Kaja Silverman) to leverage queer critique. Mobilising this constellation of anecdote and citation, Nelson’s maternal self-disclosure produces a critique of the broad devaluation of caretaking and its partitioning from other subject positions, most notably that of the writer.

**Authority and Reception**

The positive reception of *The Argonauts* is contingent on Nelson’s capacity to secure narrative authority. Nelson obtains her narrative authority both within the text and outside it in paratextual space. As I will go on to demonstrate, the interaction between anecdotal and citational forms is imperative to how Nelson secures this authority. At large, the relationship between narrative authority and reception is shaped by *The Argonauts*’ status as an autobiographical text.

In particular, the reception of *The Argonauts* is mediated by constructions of authorship and authority in autobiographical writing. Recent life writing scholarship has stressed the
performativity of the autobiographical subject.⁴⁸ Life writing scholar, Anna Poletti explains that this allows us to understand autobiographical narration as producing rather than documenting subjectivity and a life, which is understood here to be constituted through “activities, fantasies, attachments and orientations.”⁴⁹ Smith and Watson observe that in autobiography the relationship between author and reader “ultimately comes down to mutual trust.”⁵⁰ More precisely, Smith and Watson outline how narrators are thought to be authorities and close readers of their own experiences, which operate as a “primary kind of evidence” in autobiography.⁵¹ Despite the currency experience has in this context, its reception is contingent on the reading public who are implicated in determining which experiences are socially legitimate and who has the “cultural authority” to narrate certain stories.⁵²

I argue that cultural capital becomes a factor in the reading public’s determination of Nelson’s narrative authority.⁵³ As previously noted, Nelson’s cultural capital is demonstrated by her educational credentials, awards received (particularly the 2016 MacArthur Fellowship), a teaching job at California Institute of the Arts and a publishing record of nine books.⁵⁴ These officially mandated qualifications arrive with a personal history of involvement in queer and trans artistic circles, references to which are peppered throughout the text and mentioned in interviews. Without this cultural capital, it seems less certain that The Argonauts would command its current readership and credibility. On the other hand, it is rarely if ever a given that subjects constituted through experiences of marginalisation will

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⁵⁰ Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 32.
⁵¹ Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 26-27.
⁵² Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 28-30.
⁵³ In a queer context, Summer Melody Pennell defines cultural capital, a concept taken from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, as “the knowledges, advantages and privileges that come with membership in a social group or class.” Summer Melody Pennell, “Queer cultural capital: implications for education,” Race Ethnicity and Education 19, no. 2 (2016): 324.
⁵⁴ CalArts, “Faculty/Staff Directory,” Cal Arts.
secure autobiographic narrative authority if they are not viewed as legitimate by a reading public. Thus, Nelson’s perceived authority is neither indefinitely secure nor random but informed by cultural capital and negotiated with a readership. This negotiation indicates how the reading public possesses a degree of authority in determining Nelson’s narrative authority and the overall reception of the text.

Interviews are one forum where Nelson can mediate her relationship with the reading public to buoy her narrative authority. Life writing scholar, Kate Douglas explains that contemporary autobiographical authors are characterised by a “constructed accessibility” and positioned as “everyday people” with “notable achievements.” Crucially, Douglas notes that public appearances of the author are imperative to the authentication of the autobiographical text as well as its commercial success. Nelson is no exception to this: her numerous interviews ensure her ability to stage intellectual and affective connections with a reading public. They also enable Nelson to use her authorial persona to try and widen the catchment of her readership. Certainly, her interviews occur across a wide array of platforms including The New Yorker, The Guardian, ABC Radio, VICE, Tin House and Literary Hub. Since Nelson’s tone in these interviews is casual and occasionally anecdotal (not to mention the odd reference to a theoretical or literary text), they operate, as Douglas suggests, as a kind of crosschecking mechanism whereby readers are more likely to trust Nelson when her textual and public voices are consistent. As such, we can understand Nelson’s interview presence as one way through which she secures the trust of the reading public which is key to the establishment of her narrative authority and the commercial success of the text.

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55 Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 28.
In terms of reception, reviews of *The Argonauts* exemplify how readers develop affective investments in Nelson’s authorship, whether this derives from interviews, the text or a combination of the two. One such example is the *Feministing* review of *The Argonauts* by Sam Huber in which he describes the text as “a thrilling realization of that effort so central to so many queer and feminist lives: the effort to live (with) our theory.”

Almost a year later, Huber reflects on his review at a *Barnard Center for Research on Women* Salon:

> I wanted the book to belong to *me*, or to my *us*, and not to self-satisfied straight people relieved by the reparative turn. That proprietary identification—no, no, Maggie gets *me*—seems (if you’ll permit an unscientific observation) to be fairly common . . . in my social worlds.

Here, Huber illuminates how attachment to the text can be derived from queer affiliation (“my *us*”) and theoretical investments (“our theory”). Yet, Huber eventually argues against both for their monopolistic and possessive mode of attachment, which curtail “the pleasures of sharing this book.”

More importantly, when Huber reflects on his former reading of the text, he frames it as “Maggie gets *me*” not as “*The Argonauts* gets me.” Here, the use of the first name and the preferencing of author over text, registers attachment to Nelson’s authorial persona. In other words, Huber’s reception of *The Argonauts* is routed through his reception of Nelson’s authorship, which further reinforces why it is crucial for Nelson to secure and maintain her narrative authority.

Within the parameters of the text the question of narrative authority is refracted through the question of how anecdote and citation are authorised. The interaction between these

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60 Huber, “Speaker Comments,” *Barnard Center for Research on Women.*
fragmentary forms bolsters Nelson’s anecdotal authority by appealing to the citational authority of feminist and queer affiliated writers, artists and theorists. In this way, Nelson’s personal concerns gain a broader context and a deeper social resonance. Nelson not only cites these figures, but on occasion also elevates her narrative authority by claiming a personal proximity to some of them. The most notable instance of this is an anecdote in which Nelson describes being taught by Eve Sedgwick in a graduate seminar titled “Non-Oedipal Models of Psychology” (Argo, 111). Thus, in name-dropping a foundational queer theorist, Nelson furthers her own theoretical credentials, which positions readers to trust her use of social theory across the text more broadly. Yet, as previously noted, the citational focus on feminist and queer affiliated writers, artists and theorists creates a hierarchy of citation within the text. This hinders those that feature in the anecdotes of daily, small-scale interactions including friends and strangers, from becoming sources of authority, rather than prompts for Nelson’s disclosure and critique.

In addition to their relation to citation, anecdotes in *The Argonauts* gain authority in accordance with their relation to time. Nelson’s temporal distance or proximity to the events of particular anecdotes shape their validity. There are two noteworthy examples of this. First, the New York bar anecdote, which reflects on changes in Nelson’s perception of dependence, demands the use of hindsight from many years passing for the observation to be made. Second, the anecdote about Nelson’s marriage to Harry at the time of Proposition 8’s passage uses an immediate proximity to the political moment for its impact. Yet in effect, we can understand all forms of self-disclosure and cultural critique in *The Argonauts* as being produced by the moment in which they were written and published. In tandem with this, it can be speculated that the reception of the text becomes shaped by the social and political
conditions in which readers encounter it. Nelson foregrounds this question through her discussion of *The Argonauts*’ marriage anecdote in *The White Review* interview:

> Take for example the conversations in *THE ARGONAUTS* surrounding homonormativity or heteronormativity, they’re falling in a particular way right now. In twenty years time, the concerns are going to have changed. We’re not going to be wondering how and if gay marriage across all fifty states is going to have changed anything. We’re going to be asking questions about if it has. So part of my interest in this book was to write something that I knew would be dated, so it was kind of an artefact of the moment.\(^{61}\)

As recently as January 2017, less than two years since *The Argonauts*’ initial publication, Nelson commented in an interview with Amber Dawn that *The Argonauts* already “feels really dated to me now.”\(^{62}\) Here, Nelson’s commentary is useful for flagging the way the social landscape in which the book was written plays out against its ongoing reception by a reading public. The currently unanswerable question this poses is how the queer critique Nelson leverages across *The Argonauts* will gain, lose or maintain its resonance with a readership as social conditions shift with the accumulation of years since its publication. Although Nelson speculates about this question, I suggest that there is critical value in not foreclosing the possible trajectories of reception that the text will take.

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Afterword

In summary, my thesis demonstrates how *The Argonauts* uses anecdote and citation to generate self-disclosure and cultural critique. I have made the case that conceiving of anecdote as a form of microanalysis illuminates how Nelson links the micro-scale of her everyday experiences to macro scale critiques pertaining to the cultural politics of gender and sexuality. Specifically, I have argued that critique occurs when Nelson employs the small-scale observations arising from her pregnant embodiment, early motherhood and relationship with Harry Dodge to intervene in the social understanding of queer maternity, marriage and caretaking.

In the case of queer maternity, I have established how Nelson anecdotally relates encounters with strangers, friends and colleagues across public, domestic and literary spaces to critique assumptions about queer maternal subjectivity. This critique entails Nelson asserting her presence in domains frequently understood as cordoned off from maternal access, including radicality, sexuality and the literary. The macro frames of social theory further endorse Nelson’s experience, particularly in referencing Susan Fraiman and Kaja Silverman, Nelson provides an alternate way of understanding maternity: one that is entwined with non-normative, nonprocreative sexuality (the sodomitical mother) and bounded by the limits of maternal care (the finite mother).

In terms of *The Argonauts’* genderqueer love plot, Nelson’s anecdotal reflections on the small-scale interactions between the couple and strangers are used to critique the regulation of gender in public spaces. Moreover, Nelson’s narration of her marriage to Harry gives the political juncture of Proposition 8 legibility at the micro-scale of individual lives. In the marriage anecdote, as with queer maternity, Nelson puts pressure on the assumed standoff
between the normative and the transgressive within radical strands of queer politics. This intervention opens space for readers to consider what investments and attachments underlie the invocation or rejection of these terms at large.

In the case of caretaking, *The Argonauts* directs anecdotes towards a criticism of the notion that independence can exist without recognition of need and that the relations of care emerging from this dependence necessarily run counter to a personal sense of freedom. In tandem with this, Nelson’s insistence that caretaking is a form of flexible social relationality puts articulations of care into a queer frame, yet in keeping with the project of *The Argonauts*, this frame does not obscure the queer maternal.

I have speculated that Nelson’s critique could have been expanded by providing friends and strangers encountered via anecdote with more descriptive depth and/or access to citational authority. Nevertheless, *The Argonauts*’ affirmation of feminist and queer intellectual genealogies via the idea of “many gendered-mothers” remains noteworthy for its reminder of the multiple forms that self-disclosure can take in life narrative. In particular, Nelson’s production of her writing-self around scenes of literary and queer theoretical attachment testifies to the impact of self-knowledge obtained through encounters with texts.

In sum my reading of *The Argonauts* through a microanalytic lens exemplifies the critical capacities of micro-forms of observation, description and analysis in the aesthetic context of life writing. I suggest that the narrative and analytic value of anecdote and citation as micro-forms in *The Argonauts* should draw our attention to their manifestations in other texts. If *The Argonauts* has a principle lesson, it could well be that in the specificity of the small-scale there exists an entry point to social critique and large-scale change.
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