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### **The Argonauts, autotheory and political agency**

'In autotheory, then, it is not so much that the personal must become political, but that the personal must first become theoretical' (Clare, 2020, p. 85).

Maggie Nelson's 2015 book *The Argonauts*, according to Wiegman, 'stages autotheory as an encounter between first person narration and theory as an established body of contemporary academic thought.' (2020, p. 1-2). The book recounts different aspects of Nelson's early and later relationship with artist Harry Dodge, including her pregnancy and the birth of their child Iggy. In this paper I argue that the personal events Nelson recounts and the theory that she relates them to, contextualise and activate the theory used in the text, in such a way that suggests the potential for political agency to be brought about. I'm going to share some sections from the book that are connected to theoretical quotations and discuss their relationship.

Noticing a mug with an image of Maggie Nelson seven months pregnant at Christmas 'wearing a high ponytail and leopard print dress; Harry and his son are wearing matching dark suits, looking dashing.'

The friend said, *I've never seen anything so heteronormative in my life*. Nelson goes on to say, 'but what about it is the essence of heteronormativity?'

Or is the presumed opposition of queerness and procreation...more a reactionary embrace of how things have shaken down for queers than the mark of some ontological truth?

...What about the fact that Harry is neither male nor female? (Nelson, 2015, p.15-16)

Nelson then quotes Judith Butler: 'When or how do *new kinship systems mime older nuclear-family arrangements* and when or how do they *radically recontextualize them in a way that constitutes a rethinking of kinship?*' This seems to be a central question for the book, what does it mean for queer people to form a nuclear family, can kinship be rethought through the process of queer coupling or marriage? For me, Nelson's book is essentially in dialogue with notions of normativity, on the one hand aligning with it through a described marriage and pregnancy, on the other hand disrupting this through describing a genderqueer couple: a relationship between a cis gender woman and a transitioning person.

Also, exploring the question of female experience, in a way that is tied to transgender experience, allows the text to enquire into the way that different lives are determined in capitalism. In the book Nelson and Dodge are a genderqueer couple. Dodge is transitioning through the book and his changes are woven together with Nelson's pregnancy.

In other parts of the book Nelson raises the notion of homonormativity, where LGBTQIA+ people seek marriage, children and buy houses, for instance. The book seems to be inviting a question about Nelson and Dodge's life together in relation to this concept. What does it mean to be a genderqueer couple and to take a photograph that looks like the essence of heteronormativity? The book describes Dodge as 'neither male nor female' and that he happily identifies as a butch on T (Nelson, 2015, p. 65). Related to this, Nelson quotes Beatriz (now Paul) Preciado, saying, 'I

do not want the female gender that has been assigned to me at birth. Neither do I want the male gender that transsexual medicine can furnish and that the state will award me if I behave in the right way. I don't want any of it' (Nelson, 2015, p. 65-66). The question of normativity here is raised in relation to gender, what does it mean to reject both male and female?

Returning to Butler, '*Performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms to force them to resignify. This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap one is inevitably in.*' (Nelson, 2015, p. 18) Nelson, addresses performativity as it relates to gender, returning to Butler throughout the book. The question of how both Nelson and Dodge relate to their genders is an ongoing enquiry. I argue that their relationship to gender is tied to political agency.

For instance, Nelson talks about waking to find that Prop 8 was going to pass and her and Dodge deciding to get married that day. Prop 8 was a California ruling against same sex marriage.

'We were surprised at our shock, as it revealed a passive naïve trust that the arc of the moral universe, however long, tends towards justice. But really justice has no coordinates, no teleology.'

'By the end of the day, 52 percent of California voters had voted to pass Prop 8, thus halting "same sex marriage" across the state.' (Nelson, 2015, p. 28-9)

Nelson and Dodge, rush to get married as it looks as though they will be disallowed from doing so by the impending legal result. What does it mean for a queer couple to marry?

Nelson states, 'There's something truly strange about living in a historical moment in which the conservative anxiety and despair about queers bringing down civilisation 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 civilisation and its institutions...'

Here, queer marriage challenges the institution itself while queerness also fails to effectively challenge mainstream institutions. Nelson quotes Leo Bersani, 'If there's one thing homonormativity reveals, it's the troubling fact that *you can be victimised and in no way be radical; it happens very often among homosexuals as with every other oppressed minority*' (Nelson, 2015, p. 32). The question of assent, by queer people, to a form of normativity is discussed here.

Nelson goes on to say, 'This is not a devaluation of queerness. It is a reminder: if we want to do more than claw our way into repressive structures, we have our work cut out for us' (Nelson, 2015, p. 32). The question of how to live, as queer people, is raised while a further question can be asked - how can autotheory like this provide a context for the pursuit of agency with and through a text?

What are the benefits of weaving critical theory with personal accounts? How can personal accounts contextualise theoretical ideas in ways that embed each in the other, bringing about thoughts of social change?

Talking of the exhibition *Puppies and Babies* Nelson says, '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 nonhuman animals...' (Nelson, 2015, p. 90) Here Nelson raises the alternatives to nuclear families that queer people form, this being, I would say, an act of agency in a capitalist culture that remains vastly heteronormative.

Quoting the photographer Catherine Opie as saying, ‘basically, becoming homogenised and part of mainstream domesticity is transgressive for someone like me. Ha. That’s a very funny idea.’

Nelson continues, ‘Funny to her, maybe, but to those who are freaked out about the rise of homonormativity and its threat to queerness, not so much.’ (Nelson, 2015, p. 93) Here, Nelson and Dodge could be part of the rise of homonormativity, while also acting, through their marriage as a means of challenging the terms of the institution itself. The question of what constitutes agency for a queer person is implicit within the book. What is the best way to act? What are the best choices to make?

Wiegman says that Nelson acknowledged taking the term ‘autotheory’ from Paul Preciado’s *Testo Junkie*, she emphasises the connection between both books, saying, ‘to be sure, there is a deep kinship between these works, especially their interest in gender’s queer compositions.’ The question of ‘gender’s queer compositions’ is an interesting one, where Preciado’s book tells of his experience taking testosterone, while Harry Dodge’s experience as a trans person is a key narrative in the book, for instance,

‘Your inability to live in your skin was reaching its peak...

*I just want you to feel free*, I said in anger disguised as compassion, compassion disguised as anger.

Don’t you get it yet? you yelled back. I will never feel as free as you do...never feel as at home in my own skin...’ (Nelson, 2015, p. 38-9)

Going on to talk about a trans student’s mother’s article in a national newspaper about their child’s transition:

‘I told you I was sick of stories in the mainstream media told by comfortably cis gendered folks—presumably “us”—expressing grief over the transitions of others.’ (Nelson, 2015, p. 62)

In her interview with Micah McCrary in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, Nelson says she felt a ‘tremendous kinship’ with the start of Paul Preciado’s book *Testo Junkie*, which says,

‘This book is not a memoir. This book is a testosterone-based, voluntary intoxication protocol, which concerns the body and affects of BP. A body-essay. [...] If things must be pushed to the extreme, this is a somato-political fiction, a theory of the self, a self-theory.’ (McCrary, 2015)

Nelson described *The Argonauts* as a similarly ‘T-based protocol’ and it is a key part of the book in which Nelson discusses how the implications of Dodge taking testosterone had been something Nelson feared and had voiced to Dodge, who responded that he was scared too but also just needed Nelson’s support. For instance Nelson describes how,

‘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. On the inside, we were two human animals undergoing transformations beside each other, bearing each other loose witness. In other words, we were ageing’ (Nelson, 2015, p. 103).

The question of difference, between Nelson and Dodge for instance, is counteracted by Nelson’s discussion of sameness, where,

‘I don’t know many—if any—queers who think of their desire’s main feature as being “same-sex”...’

‘But whatever sameness I’ve noted in my relationships with women is not the sameness of Woman, and certainly not the sameness of parts. Rather, it is the shared, crushing understanding of what it means to live in a patriarchy.’ (Nelson, 2015, p. 31)

This critique of patriarchy, acknowledged explicitly here and underpinning the whole book, is a central debate for Nelson.

A key question is, can the combination of theory with personal writing activate that theory, contextualise it and connect aspects of human life with larger ideas that invite questions about how to live? For instance, Nelson writes, ‘Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wanted to make way for *queer* to hold all kinds of resistances and fracturings and mismatches that have little or nothing to do with sexual orientation. “Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, *troublant*,” she wrote.

‘...That is what reclaimed terms do—they retain, they insist on retaining, a sense of the fugitive.’ (Nelson, 2015, p. 35-6)

Two pages later Nelson describes how, ‘Your son’s custody remained unsettled and the specter of a homophobic or transphobic judge deciding his fate, our family’s fate, turned our days tornado green.’ (Nelson, 2015, p. 38). By defining queer as ‘holding all kinds of resistances’ and discussing the possibility of a discriminatory judge, the prospect of how to act in such a moment is raised. Nelson doesn’t discuss protest directly but the argument appears to be that living a queer life is a form of resistance itself.

Wiegman says, ‘autobiography has been defined and defended as the genre most able to revise the hierarchical predilections of dominant history-making by giving detailed accounts of the daily life and historical presence of the socially forgotten or marginalized’ (2020, p. 3). The question of the queer couple as a marginalised entity seems critical for Nelson’s text, the position of the transitioning person also being central.

When Ralph Clare says that, ‘in autotheory, then, it is not so much that the personal must become political, but that the personal must first become theoretical’ (Clare, 2020, p. 85), for me this raises the political role of theory and how critical theory has been connected to practical change, actions that can be brought about. Perhaps the personal becomes political *through* its relationship to theory?

He goes on to say, ‘a major characteristic of autotheory is its very ability to bring together theory in both form and content and to transform theory and fiction, as well as our understanding of each genre’ (Clare, 2020, p. 90). For me this transformation is critical. Where critical theory might be easily siloed in academic contexts, autotheory like Nelson’s can activate it, reconnect theory to its original intention to inspire practice and actions in the world, connect it with accessible writing that opens up the potential of both personal writing and theory. For me, autotheory, is *the* way of utilising critical theory, a way of making it relatable and relevant to a wider audience.

For Clare, *The Argonauts*, ‘treats theory as inseparable from life/praxis’, (2020, p. 98) this for me is a key point in relation to the text, theory and practice are interwoven and depend on each other, activate each other, and make the theoretical points relevant to a lived existence, that is, profoundly queer. He goes on, ‘just as the memoir genre is “queered” and the familiar everyday is made strange, so too is everyday domestic life queered in the book yet made to seem

mundane' (Clare, 2020, p. 98). The question of normality and normativity is a key one here. The book makes familiar a family life that is queer.

Taking all these points together, I ask, what are the benefits of weaving critical theory with personal accounts? How can personal accounts contextualise theoretical ideas in ways that embed each in the other, bringing about thoughts of social change? For me, Nelson's text embeds the notion of change within it, the change of relationships, of bodies, and this question connects implicitly to notions of social change. I propose a politicised reading of the potential of Nelson's text, one that makes an argument for autotheory's practical application of concepts in ways that can affect human lives. Queer theory is a focal point for the text, the voices of queer writers tracing the journey of different points and arguments throughout the book. The personal account of events that narrate the queerness of Nelson and her partner, of their family, makes an explicit argument for the ability and right of everyone to live life in any way that feels right to them. I ask, can autotheory like this provide a context for the pursuit of agency with and through a text? For me *The Argonauts* acts as a kind of map, an account of queer life that can be followed while aligned with an agency that can be explored in relation to it.

## **Bibliography**

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