

Embracing Maternal Eroticism: Queer Experiences of Pleasure in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I approach *The Argonauts* (2015), specifically Nelson's attention to maternal desire and eroticism through the lens of motherhood studies and matricentric feminism. I argue that *The Argonauts* provides a compelling contribution to a fairly new, but increasingly pertinent, discourse of empowered mothering. Nelson's accounts of the erotic experience of mothering, coupled with details of her sexual experiences within and outside of her relationship with her partner, Harry, address what has heretofore been a deep-seated contradiction between the maternal body and sexual and erotic pleasure and desire. Nelson makes space for the consideration of motherhood and the erotic not as antithetical, but deeply entwined realms of experience. By drawing on Audre Lorde's meditations on the erotic, as well as scholarship on maternal eroticism, I contend that *The Argonauts* exposes aspects of feminine and maternal experiences that transgress a patriarchal institution of motherhood which ultimately seeks to contain these experiences within the private sphere of the family.

Keywords: motherhood, neoliberalism, academic feminisms, mothering, eroticism

INTRODUCTION

In her genre-defying poetic/critical memoir *The Argonauts* (2015), Maggie Nelson explores the interstices of sex, mothering, and language in the age of North American neoliberalism. Nelson reflects on her experiences of family-making with her partner, artist Harry Dodge, through her journey of conceiving and giving birth to her son Iggy while learning to care for her stepson at the same time. She also provides readers with insight into her creative and academic life as a writer and professor. The book was received with great acclaim and was named as one of the *New York Times*' "Notable Books" in 2015. It also earned Nelson the 2015 National Book Critics Circle award in the category of "criticism," underscoring the text's fluidity of genre and its wide reach. Shortly after publication of *The Argonauts*, Nelson was awarded a prestigious MacArthur "Genius" Grant which further established her reputation as a leading writer in North America today.

Responding to a question about her relationship to mothering in an interview with *The Rumpus*, Nelson highlights her interest in thinking about categorisation and relationality, specifically in terms of the maternal. Nelson wonders:

Can we talk about the maternal function, whatever that might be, without invariably tethering it to the maternal body? How can we have that conversation without eliding the maternal body? Should we be hanging onto something called "the maternal function," or should we be talking about an "ordinary devotion" that people of all genders can participate in? Should we be talking about forms of devotion and care that exceed and exist apart from the baby/mother/parent model? (Steinke, 2015)

Nelson raises questions about the contours of modern care and contemplates the position of biology in maternal and parental practice. This interview response reveals Nelson's interest in the physical aspect of care which also plays a central theme in *The Argonauts*. The memoir ties together a number of care narratives, including Nelson's meditations on Dodge's process of gender transitioning, caring for her stepson as well as her biological son, and her own partnership with Dodge. This article focuses on Nelson's reflections on her *own* maternal body and the implications of Nelson's writing on an understanding of the maternal erotic. While in no way is Dodge's

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identity as a trans man and his practice of care irrelevant to the memoir as a whole, the scope of this article is limited to my analysis of Nelson's relationship and attention to mothering and the maternal body.¹

Alongside her own narrative voice in *The Argonauts*, Nelson weaves the words of other cultural and theoretical critics, artists, and writers—from the American poet Eileen Myles to queer theorists Eve Sedgwick and Michael Foucault—throughout the margins of her text. She refers to this multivocal group of thinkers that has profoundly shaped her own thinking about and experience of the world as the 'many-gendered mothers of [her] heart' (Nelson, 2015: 105). These 'many-gendered mothers' mark only one of the book's engagements with maternal influence and care. While a memoir so steeped in academic criticism may at first seem like a goldmine for academic critics who wish to analyse the text—Nelson already begins the work, delineating the critical conversations in which her text engages—on the contrary, *The Argonauts* presents an intellectual conundrum for the academic critic who may attempt to approach the text systematically. Reflecting on her experience with her newborn child Iggy, Nelson writes, "An erotics seems too heavy. I don't want an eros, or a hermeneutics, of my baby. Neither is dirty, neither is mirthful, enough" (2015: 20). Further along in the text, considering Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Susan Fraiman's discourse on women's 'anal eroticism' Nelson asserts:

I am not interested in a hermeneutics, or an erotics, or a metaphoric, of my anus. I am interested in ass-fucking. I am interested in the fact that the clitoris, disguised as a discrete button, sweeps over the entire area like a manta ray, impossible to tell where its eight thousand nerves begin and end. (2015: 85)

In this article I intend to explore how a reader critically approaches a book so ripe with mesmerising prose, reflections on family, love, sex, and a queer woman's experience in academia without confining Nelson's writing, and in turn her life, to an academic theory, or as she puts it, an 'eros' or a 'hermeneutics'.

I contend that a book so resistant to categorisation in its content as well as its genre calls for consideration through a critical lens that is wholly invested in porousness and fluidity. As such, in this essay I approach *The Argonauts*, specifically Nelson's attention to maternal desire and eroticism, through the lens of motherhood studies and matricentric feminism. By reading this text as a matrifocal narrative, 'in which a mother plays a role of cultural and social significance and in which motherhood is thematically elaborated and valued, and is structurally central to the plot,' I argue that *The Argonauts* provides a compelling contribution to a fairly new but increasingly pertinent conversation of empowered mothering (O'Reilly, 2016: 6). Nelson's account of the erotic experience of mothering, coupled with details of her sexual experiences within and outside of her relationship with Dodge, addresses what has heretofore been a deep-seated cultural polarisation between the maternal body and sexual and erotic pleasure and desire. By drawing on Audre Lorde's meditations on the erotic (1984), as well as the (still scant) body of scholarship on maternal eroticism (de Marneffe, 2004; Kinser, 2008; Oxenahndler, 2001), I argue that Nelson's writing on erotic experiences in relation to both her child and her partner underscore the complexity of pleasure in its abundance of forms. In doing so, Nelson makes space for the consideration of motherhood and the erotic not as antithetical, but deeply entwined realms of experience. Further, the resistance to categorisation that *The Argonauts* heralds provides a model of empowered mothering that works to undermine a heteropatriarchal neoliberal order through the process of queer family-making.

Before I turn to my own reading of *The Argonauts*, it is necessary to provide a brief discussion of both the political and academic landscape of motherhood and mothering that shapes Nelson's text. In *Mothering in the Age of Neoliberalism* (2014), Lynn O'Brien Hallstein argues that "Contemporary American motherhood is shaped by a post-feminist landscape in which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined" (Hallstein, 2014: 299). Contrary to a popular cultural belief that second-wave feminism had effectively resolved gender-issues and inequality, O'Brien Hallstein suggests, "One post-feminist hallmark is contemporary mothers' split subjectivity (...) between second wave feminist gains in the public sphere and ongoing patriarchal gender-based roles in the private sphere" (2014: 299). In other words, a neoliberal and patriarchal order conscribes mothers to actively participate in public markets through work outside of the home while at the same time requires them to fully participate in and fulfil motherwork in the private sphere. O'Brien Hallstein continues:

In its foci on individual choice, personal responsibility, and privatization, neoliberalism intersects with the post-second wave contexts in ways that 'resolve' the post-second wave crisis in femininity by reinforcing, encouraging, and further entrenching a neo-traditional family configuration. (2014: 298)

The 'neo-traditional family configuration' as the basis for mothering in a neoliberal order results in the reproduction of the patriarchal institution of motherhood instead of providing women with opportunities to practice empowered mothering and care. As Judith Warner explains, post-second wave mothers have 'been bred to be independent and self-sufficient. To rely on their own initiative and personal responsibility. To *privatize* their

¹ Though beyond the scope of this article, a future project may consider Dodge's practice of care for both Nelson and his children as narrated through the lens of Nelson.

problems' (2014: 304). As such, the emotional and psychological experiences and practices of contemporary mothers are meant to be compartmentalised and privatised

The argument can be made that through her whiteness, financial privilege and job stability, as well as her relationship with a male-identifying individual, one could classify Nelson as a person who is responsible for perpetuating a heteropatriarchal neoliberal order. Nelson herself grapples with this issue of 'homonormativity' in *The Argonauts*: "If there's one thing that homonormativity reveals, it's the troubling fact that *you can be victimized and in no way be radical*" (Nelson, 2016: 26, Original emphasis). I contend, however, that Nelson's expression of erotic attachments to her children as well as romantic partners and the act of making these experiences public highlight the subversion of this order.²

Responding to this 'post-second wave crisis of femininity,' a key thinker in motherhood studies, Andrea O'Reilly, argues that "Mothers need a matricentric mode of feminism organised from and for their particular identity and work as mothers. Indeed, a mother-centered feminism is needed because mothers—arguably more so than women in general—remain disempowered despite forty years of feminism" (2016: 3). This matricentric feminism calls for mothers to practice empowered mothering. Empowered mothering functions as 'an oppositional discourse' to patriarchal motherhood (O'Reilly, 2016: 69). Patriarchal motherhood refers to the construction and practice of mothering under a patriarchal order in which the powers of the state subject mothers and mothering to oppression, essentialism, and institutionalisation. In *The Argonauts*, Nelson narrates a woman's experience of empowered mothering through her repeated insistence that eroticism is embedded in the practice of mothering. In this way, Nelson provides a valuable example of how underscoring multiplicity and messiness can begin to dismantle the neoliberal privatisation of motherhood and mothering. With her memoir, Nelson imparts her experiences of pleasure as well as those of pain in great detail to a public audience, exposing aspects of feminine and maternal subjectivities that threaten a patriarchal institution of motherhood that ultimately seeks to contain these experiences within the private sphere of the family.

As I have noted, in part because of its resistance to genre and categorisation, *The Argonauts* serves as an intriguing text for academic critics who wish to parse out Nelson's own academic and narrative insights. Relevant to my discussion are the critics who have considered Nelson's text in relation to issues of maternity, pleasure, and desire. Robin Silbergleid (2017), for example, suggests that *The Argonauts* falls under the genre of a queer motherhood memoir and questions the ways in which this text as well as other queer motherhood memoirs such as *Waiting in the Wings* by Cherrie Moraga (1997) and A.K Summers' *Pregnant Butch* (2014), attempt to highlight the 'queering' of motherhood practices. She cites Margaret Gibson to suggest:

It is a mistake to think that queering motherhood is only and inevitably a matter of addition, of bringing parents who identify as 'queer' and/or 'trans' into existing unyielding frameworks (...) Queering motherhood can therefore start where any of the central gendered, sexual, relational, political, and/or symbolic components of 'expected' motherhood are challenged. (Gibson, quoted in Silbergleid, 2017)

The Argonauts not only brings queer-identifying individuals into a framework of parental care, but more specifically questions the use of the term 'queer' when it comes to motherhood and mothering (Silbergleid, 2017). *The Argonauts* asks readers to consider: "To what extent is maternal eroticism also the site of queer maternity? Is the maternal body always already queer and/or essentially conventional?" (Silbergleid, 2017). While Silbergleid is right in suggesting that Nelson certainly raises these important questions (and many others) about queer mothering, maternal eroticism, and the transgressive power inherent in motherwork, I argue that more critical work needs to actively attempt to interrogate these questions, rather than let our thinking remain at the level of speculation. My work here begins to fill in the critical gap in work on *The Argonauts* that fully considers queer maternal bodies, eroticism, and pleasure.

Constance Furey approaches Nelson's commentary on eroticism from a theological standpoint (2016). In "Eros and *The Argonauts*" Furey writes, "I invoke Nelson's *Argonauts* [sic] here because it explores the erotics of family creation through the erotics of language, in a text that explicitly foregrounds the interactive nature of language" (2016: 157). I agree with Furey in that "The intertwining of words and pleasure on the first page of the book echo Nelson's longstanding sense that words and the erotics of interactive pleasure are inseparable," however, Furey attempts to read the text through a "hermeneutics of intersubjectivity" using the work of Judith Butler (2004) and Amy Hollywood (2002). As a result, Furey falls into the particular temptation that Nelson asks readers and critics to resist—the temptation to fit her narrative neatly into an eros or a hermeneutics of motherhood, pleasure, or desire (2016: 158). This critical attempt to compartmentalise Nelson's work into a neat theoretical frame fails to embrace the writer's resistance to narrative and generic categorisation.

² For a more detailed discussion of 'homonormativity' in queer studies, see: Duggan, L. "The New Normativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism" (2002), in R. Castronovo and D. Nelson (eds), *Materializing Democracy*, (pp. 175-194). Durham, NC: Duke UP.

Unlike Furey, other critics have attempted to resist the impulse to categorise and theorise Nelson's text using strict theoretical frameworks or ideologies. For example, in her response to *The Argonauts*, Jackie Stacey comments on a similar question to the one that I have been grappling with here: How can one be a 'good enough' reader of the book? Picking up on Nelson's use of D.W. Winnicott's concept of the 'good enough mother,' Stacey argues:³

If we take the centrality of the 'good-enough' in *The Argonauts* as our guide, then we should resist the temptation to idealize both the book and its author. To extend the good-enough to the dynamics between the reader and the author is to refuse idealizing relations between writing and its reception, and to welcome ambiguity and ambivalence on both sides. (2018: 205)

Instead of fitting the text into a theoretical purview or an ethics, Nelson challenges her readers to think between the lines of traditional academic discourse and to embrace the ambiguities inherent in *The Argonauts*. The book breaks down literary genres as well as relational genres and modes of reproduction and kinship so that 'even its break with citational conventions underscores the vision of the scrambled lines of descent that belong to the new improvised kinships of queer and feminist lives in all their *messy* and incomplete glory' (Stacey, 2018: 207, my emphasis).⁴

I want to latch onto Stacey's use of the word 'messy' as a descriptor of queer and feminist lives because the idea of messiness also proves productive for considering feminist *maternal* lives and bodies in particular. An embrace of messiness has appeared in much of the critical work by maternal theorists and scholars of motherhood studies. Amber Kinser, for example, considers the relationship between historical waves of American feminism, writing:

For me, third wave thinking invites even more examinations of the *messiness* of feminist living than we have heretofore been situated to explore, partly because the strong second-wave ground on which we stand, and partly because the current political, global, technological, postfeminist, sociocultural milieu creates *messier* living. (2008: 119, my emphasis)

Both Stacey and Kinser invoke this concept of messiness in political and figurative senses. Yet, with *The Argonauts* Nelson points to the messiness of women's, specifically mothers' lives, in a more embodied sense. By emphasising the maternal experiences of pleasure and desire, Nelson literally and figuratively fleshes out the maternal body in *The Argonauts* which allows for broader visions of the physical and emotional tensions that arise from the intersections of woman/mother/partner/professor/sister/friend.

Adrienne Rich has (now famously) defined two different meanings of motherhood. One understanding of motherhood refers to the 'potential relationship' between a mother and child, while the other refers to motherhood as a patriarchal institution which requires and ensures that all women remain under male control (1976: 13). Rich argues that women 'need to understand the power and powerlessness embodied in motherhood in patriarchal culture' (Rich, 1976: 16). It is unsurprising then, considering that the institution of American motherhood has been constructed within patriarchy, that there is relatively little critical work that considers the erotic lives of mothers and the physical experience of mothering.⁵ Further, according to O'Reilly, academic feminism has historically elided the maternal and 'the disavowal of the maternal in twenty-first-century academic feminism is deliberate and necessary, (...) enacted in order to protect and promote the illusion of the autonomous subject favoured by neoliberalism and celebrated in much of feminist theory (O'Reilly, 2016: 209). While economic, political, and social gains have been made for women as a result of decades of feminist activism and scholarship, the social and political realities of mothers and the motherwork they perform have been largely overlooked by feminism. Yet, to acknowledge the maternal (and the maternal body) 'is to remember that human beings are not self-sufficient, free-floating, and unencumbered subjects (...) who are championed by neoliberalism and celebrated in feminist modernity' (O'Reilly, 2016: 206). Instead, academic feminism must welcome a matricentric feminism that understands the social and historical construction of motherhood and the relationality inherent in its ideology and practice (O'Reilly, 2016: 4).⁶

³ According to D. W. Winnicott, "A mother is neither good nor bad nor the product of illusion, but is a separate and independent entity: The good-enough mother (...) starts off with an almost complete adaptation to her infant's needs, and as time proceeds, she adapts less and less completely, gradually, according to the infant's growing ability to deal with her failure. Her failure to adapt to every need of the child helps them adapt to external realities" (1967: 26-33).

⁴ The genre and format of *The Argonauts* is unique in that visually, the body of the text is centered on the page and marginal references coincide with the relevant body text and footnotes appear throughout the text. The book is categorized by the publisher, Graywolf Press, as "Memoir/Criticism," merging genres that are often considered disparate.

⁵ The exception to the general dearth of scholarship on the physical experience of mothering is the body of work that explores the sexuality of breastfeeding (Bartlett 2005, Giles 2004, Dettwyler 2017).

⁶ Though O'Reilly contends that motherhood and mothering has historically been left out of academic feminism, it is important to note that in their writings primarily from the late-1980s to the 1990s, social reproduction theorists such as Barbara Laslett, Johanna Brenner, and Nona Y. Glazer have focused on the intersections of gender and labour (including motherwork), and the relationship to social reproduction.

Reading *The Argonauts* through a lens of matricentric feminism, a feminism that makes equal space for women who engage in motherhood and mothering as it does for women without children, reveals Nelson's interrogation of questions similar to those being asked by scholars of motherhood studies and maternal theory. For example, Nelson specifically illustrates an example of feminist resistance to the maternal when she recalls a particularly memorable seminar that she attended while in graduate school. At this event, art critic Rosalind Krauss responded to a series of North American literary theorist and amateur photographer Jane Gallop's photography that features Gallop and her young child. Krauss admonishes Gallop in front of an academic audience, calling her work 'naïve' and 'soft-minded' (Nelson, 2016: 41). The 'tacit undercurrent of [Krauss's] argument,' Nelson writes, 'was that Gallop's maternity had rotted her mind—besotted it with the narcissism that makes one think that an utterly ordinary experience shared by countless others is somehow unique, or uniquely interesting' (2016: 41). Krauss suggests that Gallop's attempt to bring the relationship between mother and child from the private into the public sphere of art and art criticism is offensive and reflective of Gallop's delusion by her child, further illustrating academic feminism's resistance to and distaste for maternity and the maternal body in general. Nelson highlights this problematic response to the maternal body and mother-child relationships and further notes that women, many who define themselves as 'feminist,' are often the most vocal advocates for women's cordoning off of the maternal from the public sphere.

As this special issue of *Feminist Encounters* dedicated to Feminism and Motherhood in the Twenty-First Century reveals, over the course of the last decade there has been a visible effort by many scholars to include critical considerations of the maternal in academic feminism. The field of motherhood studies has grown and continues to be increasingly recognised as a field in its own right in academic institutions. Still, even within the growing body of scholarship that embraces matricentric feminism, "Writers on mothering have largely stayed away from the topic of the maternal erotic, unable to locate their intensely sensual experience of mothering on a sexual continuum" (Kinser, 2008: 121). The maternal body, specifically its experience of pleasure, is still relatively undertheorised in scholarship on motherhood and mothering. In *Maternal Desire* (2004), Daphne de Marneffe points to the bifurcation of motherhood and desire as she writes, "As common wisdom would have it, 'mother' and 'desire' do not belong together in the same phrase. Desire (...) is about sex. Motherhood (...) is about practically everything but sex" (2004: 4). In the same vein, in *The Eros of Parenthood* (2001), Noelle Oxenhandler questions the origins of this hesitation to consider sexual and parental love together, asking, "But why (...) do we experience such a profound unease at the comparison of these two forms of love? Where does it come from, that sense of a frowning gaze bearing down?" (2001: 7). She cites the prevalence and criminalisation of pornography and media coverage of child sexual abuse and paedophilia as some of the leading reasons for this cultural unease. Concerns for the safety and wellbeing of children are all valid; yet, unintentional consequences of these concerns, such as the silence and repression of a mother's erotic pleasure that often derives from parenting, point to the messiness of maternal pleasure. Further, the risks of *not* articulating these experiences of maternal eroticism and desire are also grave:

The consequences [of mothers' separation of desire and parenting] have been the denial of a lifeforce in mothering, an impoverished theorizing of the embodied maternal—yet another severing of woman from her body, another way of keeping mothers from narrating their own lives. (Kinser, 2008: 121)

The Argonauts serves as Nelson's attempt, as a mother and a partner, to 'narrate [her] own life' as a method of resisting cultural taboos about motherhood and mothering, sex, pleasure, and desire and to transgress the boundaries of the heteropatriarchal institution of motherhood.

The feminist and maternal scholarship that informs my reading of *The Argonauts* considers female pleasure and maternal eroticism in two distinct ways. One branch of this thinking defines the maternal erotic as the erotic pleasure a mother, or one who engages in the practice of mothering, experiences while caring for a child. For example, as Kinser defines it, "A maternal erotic is the depth of spiritual and bodily feeling and knowledge and groundedness that is rooted in the embodied mother sustaining and nurturing the embodied child" (2008: 121). Oxenhandler is also interested in exploring the overlap of erotic and parental love:

Erotic love between adult lovers revolves around certain polarities: fusion and separateness, safety and danger, excitement and response (...). Each of these is a polarity that even in its simplest physical expression, is charged with emotion. And each of these is present already in the physical relationship between parent and child. (2001: 6)

In these terms, maternal eroticism refers to the physical relationship between mothers and their children and the pleasure derived from this specific relationship. Thinking about maternal eroticism in this sense helps to

For an overview of social reproduction theory and gender, see: Laslett, B. and Brenner, J. (1989). Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 15: 381-404.

interrogate the complex ways in which women experience the mother-child relationship. In line with this definition, the maternal erotic lends itself to biological motherhood and mothering. As I will discuss in more depth later in this article, Nelson frames her experience of giving birth to her son as an intensely erotic experience. As such, the question of the erotic feeling experienced between nonbiological mothers and children in their care is an area that still needs to be explored. While Nelson does privilege the relationship between her maternal body and her biological child in *The Argonauts*, she also acknowledges the physical experience of mothering her stepson. In this way, Nelson allows for the possibility of maternal eroticism in adoptive or nonbiological carers. In considering the potential for maternal care and practice outside of biological mother-child bonds, Nelson participates in queering motherhood, as O'Reilly contends that, "To queer motherhood, thus, is to destabilize patriarchal motherhood, particularly its ideological mandates of essentialization, normalization, naturalization, and biologicalization (...) Kinship is not defined only by blood" (O'Reilly, 2016: 101).

Another understanding of maternal eroticism that presents itself in the existing scholarship is not limited to bodily connection between mother and child. For example, in her influential essay 'The Use of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power', lesbian poet and theorist Audre Lorde argued for women's reclamation of the erotic which has historically been suppressed for fear of women's empowerment (1984). Though not speaking strictly about mothers, but women in general, Lorde claims, "Of course, women so empowered are dangerous. So we are taught to separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of our lives other than sex" (Lorde, 1984: 55). The relegation of the erotic to merely the realm of sex, according to Lorde, is a result of a patriarchal fear of women's bodily as well as spiritual, mental, and emotional power. Lorde goes on to define the erotic as:

A measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves. (1984: 54)

According to Lorde, all women can access the erotic as a method of empowerment in areas of their lives beyond physical sex. By harnessing the erotic, women can live inside themselves. For as Lorde notes, "When we live outside ourselves (...) when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's" (1984: 58). This understanding of the erotic includes a broader set of relations present in women's lives including, but not limited to, the relationship between mother and child. The maternal erotic, or maternal eroticism, then, can also refer to a mother that has fully realised and embraces erotic potential within and beyond the mother-child relationship.

While I employ Audre Lorde's theorisations of the erotic in order to think through maternal eroticism in Nelson's text, it is important to consider the different subject positions and historical contexts from which these two women were writing. As a cisgender white woman in a relationship with a transman, Nelson's relationship to the erotic is different than that of Lorde's. Further, Nelson's racial privilege as well as the potential to pass as a 'normative' heterosexual couple because of her decision to reproduce biologically with a male-identifying partner complicate her queer identity. Yet, because Lorde opens up the definition and understanding of the erotic, I suggest that while keeping race, class, gender, and sexuality in view, Lorde offers a productive frame through which to view the maternal erotic in *The Argonauts*.

In what remains of this essay, I intend to underscore moments in the *The Argonauts* in which Nelson explores the erotic depth of experiences that do not specifically derive from an experience of maternity in order to suggest that maternal bodies can and do experience sexual pleasure. I will also analyse moments in *The Argonauts* in which Nelson reflects on physical and emotional pleasure and fulfilment that directly result from the maternal experience. Altogether, Nelson's emphasis on erotic pleasure in *The Argonauts* underscores the imbrication of sexual pleasure and maternal eroticism. Nelson's text highlights the pleasures of motherhood as well as sex and in doing so, suggests that these pleasures are not always distinct from one another. Nelson complicates the idea of erotic pleasure, suggesting that sources of pleasure cannot always be singularly defined. As such, Nelson reminds readers that mothers are exceptionally multi-relational and embedded both in the lives of adults as well as their children regardless of the biological relationship between them.

Nelson opens *The Argonauts* with a scene in which she recalls the first time she has anal sex with Dodge. She writes:

The first time you fuck me in the ass, my face smashed against the cement floor of your dank and charming bachelor pad (...) *What's your pleasure?* you asked, then stuck around for an answer. (Nelson, 2016: 3)

By opening with this exchange, Nelson renders all the writing that follows as an extended ‘response’ to the question that Dodge poses to her early on in their relationship. Nelson peppers the text with references to sexual pleasure in various forms, composing a compendium of her sexual desires and experiences. For example, Nelson recalls a memory of a college lecture in which she learned about French philosopher Luce Irigaray’s well-known critique of binary and unitary thinking ‘by focusing on the morphology of the labial lips,’ then quickly jumps to a memory of a time when Nelson reached orgasm by pressing her legs together ‘while waiting in line to see *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* at Film Forum on Houston’ (Nelson, 2016: 62).⁷ Shortly after she recalls this memory, Nelson writes of the time ‘a few months before Iggy was conceived’ when she and Dodge go to see an art porn film together (2016: 63). She thinks of her favourite parts of the film which included ‘watching people hit each other during sex without it seeming violent, the scene of someone jerking off with a chunk of purple quartz down by the water, and the slow sewing of a feather onto a girl’s butt’ (Nelson, 2016: 63-64). By stringing these physically pleasurable experiences together Nelson fully illustrates her sexual desire. She is thoughtful about the sexual pleasure she experiences herself as well as the pleasure she witnesses in others, revealing her embrace of the erotic self. Lorde argues, “When I speak of the erotic (...) I speak (...) of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (1976: 55). Nelson wholeheartedly claims the erotic and fully incorporates the language of her own physical pleasure into her text.

Beyond ‘ass fucking,’ ‘fisting,’ and other sexual pleasures, *The Argonauts* include scenes of erotic pleasure that go beyond physical sex (2016: 85, 86). For example, much of the text includes Nelson’s reflection and experiences of her partner’s process of transitioning from female to male. She narrates her memories of the period in which Dodge undergoes top-surgery in Ft. Lauderdale while Nelson is pregnant with Iggy. Lying in bed in a hotel room together after the surgery, Nelson writes, “[Dodge] felt unburdened, euphoric, reborn (...) we were two human animals undergoing transformations beside each other, bearing each other loose witness. In other words, we were aging” (2016: 83). The erotic does not merely encompass physical pleasure achieved through sex. As Lorde puts it: “Within the celebration of the erotic in all our endeavors, my work becomes a conscious decision, a longed-for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered” (1976: 55). Nelson literalises Lorde’s words and enters a bed with her partner recovering from surgery. In this understated moment, Nelson highlights the pleasure she finds in witnessing change in oneself and a loved one through all the uncertainties and successes. The erotic experience of her relationship with her partner, within and beyond the body, demonstrates the uniting force of the realised erotic.

Nelson juxtaposes scenes from her erotic life with Dodge with moments of pleasure and discovery which derive from her maternal experience. After the long process of conceiving Iggy through multiple rounds of In Vitro Fertilization (IVF), Nelson’s pregnancy is full of mystery as well as revelation. Visibly pregnant and on a book tour during the third trimester of her pregnancy, Nelson reflects on the shocking friendliness that she receives from strangers in public places (2016: 89). But at the same time, she notes the resistance and repulsion of many, often male, academics who attended her talks on her book tour for *The Red Parts* (2007), a memoir about the murder of Nelson’s aunt in 1969. She recalls the shock expressed by one attendee from a ‘prestigious New York university’ who asks how she is able to work on ‘dark material’ while she is ‘with child’ (2016: 91). Reflecting on this moment, Nelson writes, “Ah yes (...) Leave it to the old patrician white guy to call the lady speaker back to her body, so that no one could miss the spectacle of that wild oxymoron, *the pregnant woman who thinks*” (2016: 91). The confusion that the pregnant ‘lady speaker’ elicits from this male academic reiterates Krauss’s disavowal of Gallop’s work which places motherhood at its centre. This contradiction between kindness from strangers and the concern and disdain expressed by academic audiences suggests the fraught nature of the pregnant body. Nelson suggests that, “The pregnant body in public is (...) obscene. It radiates a kind of smug autoeroticism: an intimate relation is going on—one that is visible to others, but that decisively excludes them” (2016: 90). It is precisely the *erotic* relationship between mother and the unborn child that is unfolding before the public eye that confounds conservative onlookers. Yet, it is the sole access of the pregnant woman to this intimate relationship, despite its publicity, that makes the experience so pleasurable for Nelson and other women.

As I have touched on earlier, it is important to note that when discussing the physical relationship between mother and child, the erotic pleasure derived from this relationship does not depend on biology. Maternal eroticism can be experienced through the *act* of mothering, as mothering requires both mental and physical work.⁸ Before Nelson includes Iggy’s birth story in the text, and even before she details her own pregnancy, she explores the

⁷ *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972), directed by Rainer Werner Fassbender, ‘is a berserk, angry, funny and exhausting analysis of sado-masochistic power games masquerading as loving relationships’ and has become a classic lesbian film (Gibley, 2003).

⁸ In *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989), Sara Ruddick argues that maternal thinking is a ‘discipline’ in its own right (1989: 24). She suggests that those engaged in maternal thinking work to fulfill three key demands of a child: “These three demands—for *preservation, growth, and social acceptability*—constitute maternal work; to be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance, and training” (1989: 17).

physical relationship between mother and step-child. Nelson's descriptions of caring for her stepson pay great attention to the body, for example, making cocoa for him with 'as much powder as can fit in the rim of a fingernail' and playing a made-up game called *Fallen Soldier* (2016: 10). In a section addressed to Dodge, Nelson writes:

I liked playing *Fallen Soldier* because it gave me time to learn about your son's face in mute repose: big almond eyes, skin just starting to freckle. And clearly he found some novel, relaxing pleasure in just lying there, protected by imaginary armor, while a near stranger who was quickly becoming family picked up each limb and turned it over, trying to find the wound. (2016:13)

Nelson revels in the experience of memorising her stepchild's physical features and growing into the role of caregiver for this child, expressing the pleasures of embodied care. De Marneffe asserts, "We may not recognize huge swaths of female erotic experience as such because they feel so diffuse. Motherhood is one such experience" (2004: 302). While the possibility for erotic pleasure may be more overt in the physical experiences of motherhood such as pregnancy, Nelson reminds us that maternal eroticism can take place beyond the physical body of the mother and child and in the *practice* of mothering and care. The erotic, as Lorde reminds us, 'is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing' (1976: 54). In these daily moments of 'doing,'—making a child food, playing silly games, laughing—maternal pleasure can be fully realised. By highlighting the erotic in the relationship between her and her stepson, Nelson opens the door for considerations of maternal eroticism between mothers and their adoptive or non-biological children.

Nelson's narration of her developing relationship with her stepson provides a valuable perspective in that it reveals that maternal relationships are neither immediate nor natural. She must 'learn about' her stepson's face, destabilising a popular cultural view that mothering is an innate and essential bond between woman and child. This learning is not only necessary for mothers of adopted or nonbiological children. Nelson suggests that she must go through a similar process of learning about her biological child's body as well. She finds erotic pleasure in this process, yet reveals her initial hesitation to fully embrace her son's infant body. She explains:

I was so in awe of Iggy's fantastic little body that it took a few weeks for me to feel that I had the right to touch him all over. Before Iggy, it always startled me to see a parent stuffing a Kleenex in the face of an unsuspecting toddler, as if a kid were just an object whose physical autonomy could be violated any time some stray mucus appeared. I wanted to attend to Iggy, but I didn't want to *ambush* him. Also, the culture's worrying over pedophilia in all the wrong places at times made me feel unable to approach his genitals or anus with wonder and glee, until one day, I realized, he's my baby, I can—indeed I must!—handle him freely and ably. My baby! My butt! Now I delight in his little butt. I delight in pouring water over his head with a toy boat full of holes, wetting his blond curls, matted with butter from a plate he recently made into a hat. (Nelson, 2016: 42)

This hesitation illustrates the observation of the societal resistance to considering erotic pleasure and mothering alongside each other which de Marneffe (2004), Kinser (2008), and Oxenhandler (2001) elucidate in their work. Yet, Nelson's wonderful revelation of her physical maternal bond with Iggy and his 'little butt' ('I can—indeed I must!') allows her to overcome the stigma associated with mother-child touch. She later remarks on the physical pleasure of placing her face in the 'dark underspace' at the nape of Iggy's neck (Nelson, 2016: 45). It is 'dark and sweaty. His thin hair is damp, smells like candy and earth, I burrow my mouth into it and breathe. I don't ever want to make the mistake of needing him as much or more than he needs me' (Nelson, 2016: 45). This intensely physical moment, deeply breathing, inhaling smells, and feeling body heat evokes the inherent eroticism of motherhood. As Nelson continues, "There's no denying that sometimes, when we sleep together in the dark cavern of the bottom bunk (...) Iggy's small body holds mine" (2016: 45). The relationship between mother and child is not one-directional, but shared and continuous between both mother and child. Pleasure moves both ways, from mother to child and child to mother.

A common place to start considering the erotic relationship between mothers and children is the experience of mothers breastfeeding as the breast represents the intersection of socially fetishised female sexuality and maternal care and nourishment. In their study of female sexuality and breastfeeding through a feminist psychoanalytic lens, Susan Chase and Mary Rogers urge feminists to embrace various experiences of breastfeeding arguing that 'no mothers' experiences of breastfeeding [should] be written off as silly, perverse, or odd, especially when they involve erotic or sexual feelings' (2001:129). Nelson reflects on her experience of breastfeeding Iggy, writing:

It is romantic, erotic, and consuming—but without tentacles. I have my baby, and my baby has me. It is a buoyant eros, an eros without teleology. Even if I do feel turned on while I'm breast-feeding or rocking him to sleep, I don't feel the need to do anything about it (and if I did, it wouldn't be with him). (2016: 44)

She acknowledges the physical pleasure of breastfeeding, even noting that it may ‘turn her on.’ But Nelson makes the important distinction that this feeling of pleasure while breast feeding is different than being aroused by a sexual partner. The erotic pleasure between Iggy and herself ‘has no tentacles’. In other words, this pleasure is not attached nor does it attach Nelson to a sexual relationship. Through broadening the definition of pleasure and reinforcing the fact that pleasure is a complex experience that derives from many sources Nelson allows for a more thorough consideration of maternal pleasure and reveals its potential for empowerment and transformation.

The passages I have quoted up to this point characterise Nelson’s experience of maternity paint a picture of blissful union, physical pleasure, and unbounded fulfilment. But it is important to note that Nelson underscores not only the pleasures of motherhood, but also feelings of pain, fear, and hopelessness that often derive from motherhood and mothering. Along with the time-consuming, physically difficult, and expensive IVF process which leaves Nelson time and again, ‘frustrated, beyond hope’ (2016: 78), Nelson’s account of Iggy’s birth emphasises the intense physical pain that often comes along with mothering. Nelson notes that before giving birth to Iggy, many people advised her, ‘*You don’t do labor. Labor does you*’ (2016: 134). She thinks, ‘This sounded good—I like physical experiences that involve surrender’ (2016: 134). But surrender seems far-off for Nelson during moments of Iggy’s birth: when a ‘pain luge’ keeps ‘going deeper’ (2016: 128, 130), when a nurse inserts a stinging catheter into her, and when she begins vomiting ‘tons of yellow bile’ (2016: 129). However, while describing this world of pain Nelson also reflects on moments of extreme pleasure: “The doctor comes in, says he’d like to break the water (...) The waters are broken. It feels tremendously good. I am lying in a warm ocean” (2016: 132). Pain and pleasure do not, and Nelson suggests cannot, exist alone. It is through this mix of pain and pleasure that Nelson becomes a mother: “And then, suddenly, Iggy. Here he comes onto me, rising. He is perfect, he is right. I notice he has my mouth, he is my gentle friend. He is on me, screaming” (2016: 133). This staccato prose mimics the quickness of breath in this moment while maintaining a sense of ease and calm. Through the juxtaposition of these oppositions, (‘gentle’/‘screaming,’ pain/pleasure), Nelson attempts to put into writing the often inexpressible experience, the pull-and-push, of mothering.

Beyond Nelson’s juxtaposition of what seem like disparate sensations in specific blocks of text, Nelson complicates a linear idea of mothering by organising *The Argonauts* non-chronologically. It is not until the near-end of the text that Nelson includes the scenes in which she gives birth to Iggy and it is in the middle portion of the book in which Nelson writes about her pregnancy. In this way, Nelson destabilises a biological and patriarchal narrative of motherhood (conception, pregnancy, labour, infancy), and in doing so explores a non-linear development of the maternal self. De Marneffe suggests, “Motherhood calls for a transformed individuality, an integration of a new relationship and a new role into one’s sense of self,” and Nelson’s memoir extends this contention, suggesting that motherhood requires a multitude of ongoing transformations (2004: 15). Nelson comments on the transformation of her physical relationship to Dodge after giving birth to Iggy. She explains:

I had always presumed that giving birth would make me feel invincible and ample, like fisting. But even now—two years out—my insides feel more quivery than lush. I’ve begun to give myself over to the idea that the sensation might be forever changed, that this sensitivity is mine now, ours, to work with. Can fragility feel as hot as bravado? I think so, but sometimes struggle to find the way. Whenever I think I can’t find it, Harry assures me that we can. And so we go on, our bodies finding each other again and again, even as they—we—have also been *right here*, all along. (Nelson, 2016: 86)

This passage serves as a stark contrast to the opening scene and the physical intensity and immediacy that marked the early days of Dodge and Nelson’s partnership. The experience of child-birth, even two years out, has ‘forever changed’ Nelson’s experience of sexual pleasure. Here, Nelson demonstrates how the erotic experience of motherhood as well as erotic experience of sexual intimacy collide.

In justifying her psychoanalytic approach to her study of maternal desire, de Marneffe writes, “[Psychoanalysis] helps us in understanding the desires women bring to mothering (...) It reveals to us that our desires, motives, and beliefs never have a single fixed meaning and that they are not always what they announce themselves to be” (2004:12). While *The Argonauts* points to the diversity of women’s desires and erotic experiences, I argue that it does so *without* relying on psychoanalysis or other academic theories that ultimately erase the embodied experience of mothering. Scholars, critics, and theorists can surely inform the way women inhabit the world, but it is the intimacy between living, breathing humans through which desire is made visible. Referencing Eve Sedgwick, Nelson reminds readers, “One happy thing that can happen (...) is that pleasure becomes accretive as well as autotelic: the more it’s felt and displayed, the more proliferative, the more possible, the more habitual it becomes” (2016:113). In the end, pleasure is as infinite as its sources. As Lorde explains, “There is a difference between painting a black fence and writing a poem, but only one of quantity. And there is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love” (1976: 58). Reading *The Argonauts* as a matrifocal narrative through the lens of matricentric feminism reveals the possibility for physical and emotional empowerment that can be found in motherhood and mothering. She embraces ‘erotic components

across relationships' through her love and care for her partner and children (Kinser, 2008:124). With this text, Nelson offers a rare example of a fully embodied mother and in doing so transgresses the boundaries of a patriarchal and neoliberal order which attempts to perpetuate an historical splintering of motherhood, pleasure, and desire.

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