Cambridge College, Massachusetts

Michelle Dicinoski

Wild associations: Rebecca Solnit, Maggie Nelson and the lyric essay

Abstract:

The lyric essay often works associatively to create meaning through metaphor, analogy, and the juxtaposition of anecdotes, observations, or citations. This paper examines these 'wild' associations in Rebecca Solnit's *The Faraway Nearby* (2013), and in Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* (2009) and *The Argonauts* (2015). It argues that all three texts work like long lyric essays and construct an essaying 'I' whose associative approach presents not just a view of the world but a method for viewing the world.

Biographical note:

Michelle Dicinoski is the author of *Ghost Wife: A Memoir of Love and Defiance* (Black Inc. 2013) and *Electricity for Beginners* (Clouds of Magellan 2011). She has taught creative writing at universities in Australia and currently works at Cambridge College in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

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Introduction

The lyric essay is evasive and difficult to define, and this slipperiness is not accidental, but constitutional. As Mark Tredinnick contends: 'The lyric essay does every lyric thing it can to try not to tell you what it wants to tell you' (Tredinnick 2011: 68). Because of this, the lyric essay often works associatively to create meaning through metaphor, analogy, and the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated anecdotes, observations, or quotations. But what do these kinds of associative structures do? Through the examples of Rebecca Solnit's *The Faraway Nearby* (2013), and Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* (2009) and *The Argonauts* (2015) – which I argue can be viewed as long lyric essays – I will suggest that this associative quality works to construct an essaying 'I' who is attempting to fashion not just a view of the world, but a *way* to view the world – a method that is shaped by wild associations.

Specifically, I will examine Solnit's use of metaphor and analogy and Nelson's use of fragments and citation. Focusing on Solnit's list-like metaphors at the sentence level, and her strings of shifting analogies more broadly, I will suggest that these associations work to construct the sense of observing the mind of the essayist at work. I will also discuss how fragments work associatively in Nelson's *Bluets*, and how the citation of the writing of others in *Bluets* and *The Argonauts* is an associative form; Nelson herself has described how her work 'leans against' that of others, and in so doing 'brings one into the land of wild associations' (2012: 88). Despite or because of this apparent 'wildness' of association, it is important to remember that these works are as carefully constructed as any other, and so is their figure of the essaying 'I'. In the final part of this article, I will discuss how each author constructs a persona (which I generally call the essaying 'I') through structural choices that also reflect her work's interest in wild association.

The Lyric Essay and Association

Before discussing *The Faraway Nearby*, *Bluets*, and *The Argonauts* as lyric essays, it is helpful to examine some existing definitions of lyric essay. What is lyric essay? How important are associations and gaps to lyric essay, and why? And can a book-length work even be considered an essay? Brenda Miller has noted that many writers 'have tried to pin down the lyric essay, defining it as a collage, a montage, a mosaic' (2012: 237). For Miller, all of these descriptions 'recognize in the lyric essay a tendency towards fragmentation that invites the reader into those gaps, that emphasizes what is unknown rather than the already articulated known' (2012: 237). Judith Kitchen notes that the lyric essay classification is generally given to works that use 'poetic language', and that are braided or experimental (2011: 115). She also emphasises the importance of the 'lyric' in lyric essay: the musicality of devices such as alliteration and assonance, and other devices of poetry, such as metaphor and repetition (Ibid.: 116-117).

Clearly, associations, gaps and juxtapositions are structurally significant in the lyric essay, and in fact are often seen as essential to the form. Deborah Tall and John D'Agata define the lyric essay as one that

> forsake[s] narrative line, discursive logic, and the art of persuasion in favor of idiosyncratic meditation … It might move by association, leaping from one path of thought to another by way of imagery or connotation, advancing by juxtaposition or sidewinding poetic logic. (1997: 7)

Of course, the lyric essay has learned many tricks from poetry. The poet Jane Hirshfield writes that, '[a] poem circles its content, calls to it from afar, looks for the hidden, tangential approach' (1997: 107), and the lyric essay works the same way, through juxaposition, fragmentation, gaps and repetition. As Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola write: 'Lyric essays favor fragmentation and imagery; they use white space and juxtaposition as structural elements' (2012: 108). In shifting so easily between fragments and topics, the structural association of the lyric essay often adds an element of surprise – a 'wildness' like that found in the work of Solnit and Nelson.

While the lyric essay is generally seen to be a short form (Tall & D'Agata 1997: 7), there is no agreed-upon length at which an essay starts or stops being an essay. The online journal *Brevity* publishes lyric essays of 750 words or fewer, while small UK publisher Fitzcarraldo Editions has a prize for book-length essays of 25,000 words or more. Especially with works that entirely lack chapters (works such as the Nelson books discussed here), it seems fitting to refer to these works as book-length essays, and some reviewers are already doing so. Given that *The Faraway Nearby*, *Bluets* and *The Argonauts* work in the same way as the lyric essay more generally – through association, digression and meditation – and given that there is no agreed-upon length for the lyric essay, it is fair and perhaps productive to consider these works as book-length lyric essays.

Rebecca Solnit's *The Faraway Nearby*

Solnit frequently draws together stories, concepts and events that at first appear to bear little relation to each other. She also shifts between modes that might be considered journalistic, lyrical, and personal. This approach has led to her work being described as 'hybrid' (O'Donnell 2015: 937) and 'collage-style' (Jamison 2013: n.p.). Solnit has said that she developed this 'hybrid' style first in her book *Savage Dreams* (1994), the subject matter of which 'was so complex you couldn't have told it in a linear, objective way, so I had to find a way to let the threads tangle and weave, that also left room for reverie and digression' (Solnit 2014: n.p). The approach she took brought together 'journalistic, critical, and finally lyrical voices (as a way of making wilder leaps of connection) that suddenly all appeared to be the one voice able to describe this complex situation' (Ibid.). These 'wilder leaps of connection' are central to Solnit's work, which 'draws on a rich polyphony of interdisciplinary knowledge' (O'Donnell 2015: 950). Indeed, '[c]reating links between seemingly disparate ideas is Solnit's gift', writes Robin Romm in a *New York Times* review, 'her stock in trade. It's what gives her writing its eccentricity, its spirit and frenetic energy' (2015: n.p.). In *The Faraway Nearby*, this interest in making links between domains also fits with Solnit's sustained interest in proximity and distance; in associating seemingly disparate concepts and stories, she brings the faraway nearby.

The Faraway Nearby commences with Solnit coming into possession of 100 pounds of apricots from her mother's tree at the same time that her mother is diagnosed with dementia and moved into a residential care facility. Solnit preserves the apricots as best she can, and a few months later undergoes medical treatment for a pre-cancerous mass before traveling to a writing residency in Iceland. These personal events prompt a wide-ranging and complex reflection on empathy, storytelling and how our stories can connect us with others. Empathy, Solnit says, brings the faraway nearby; to be cut off from our own pain and that of others, on the other hand, is to be potentially nearby but remote. We find empathy, she argues, through story.

By examining how Solnit uses metaphor and analogy, it is possible to see how the 'wild associations' of her text operate. Her metaphors move in packs; by refusing to let just one thing stand for another, they insist on multiple meanings. An example of this comes early in the first 'Apricots' chapter (and I will discuss the chapter titles soon), in which she receives the apricots from her mother's tree, spreads them out on a sheet in her bedroom, and then leaves them there for days, 'a story waiting to be told, a riddle to be solved, and a harvest waiting to be processed' (2013: 5). This parallelism is common in Solnit's writing, and when used to list distinct metaphors, it gives the text a sense of restlessness and motion. In the same paragraph, after describing the apricots' colour, their light fur, and their scent, Solnit writes, 'I had expected them to look like abundance itself and they looked instead like anxiety' (5). So in the space of one paragraph, the apricots stand in for story, for riddle, for harvest, for abundance, for anxiety. While this example may seem insignificant when considered alone, I highlight it here because it exemplifies the associative approach that Solnit uses more broadly, and at all levels of the text. This is not only how Solnit structures a sentence, but also how she structures the work at large, through shifting associations. She does not make the connections among ideas explicit at first, but instead layers together examples, almost paratactically.

This restless shifting between ideas is also evident at the paragraph level. The first 'Flight' chapter, for instance, considers how we can build lives and worlds through storytelling and writing. It makes this consideration through a series of shifts that grow increasingly purposeful as they build. The chapter's first and second paragraphs describe the Tang dynasty artist Wu Daozi, a painter of famed and mythical abilities:

> One story about him I read long ago I always remembered. While he was showing the emperor the landscape he had painted on a wall of the Imperial Palace, he pointed out a grotto or cave, stepped into it, and vanished. Some say that the painting disappeared too. In the account I remember, he was a prisoner of the emperor and escaped through his painting. (57)

The next paragraph shifts focus in a surprising way. Discussing a Road Runner and Coyote cartoon, Solnit describes how Coyote tries to trap the bird by erecting a *trompe l'oeil* painting at the edge of a precipice to give the bird the impression that the road continues. But when he chases Road Runner towards the painting (and, by extension, the edge of the cliff), the bird disappears within the painting itself. The next paragraph describes the role of the coyote in North American mythology, 'the god whose eyes and cock sometimes detach to seek their own satisfactions, who is often broken, occasionally killed, always resurrected, and never annihilated' (58). The next paragraph

more directly addresses the role of story: how we disappear into story, but '[w]e in the West have been muddled by Plato's assertion that art is imitation and illusion; we believe that it is a realm apart, one whose impact on our world is limited, one in which we do not live' (58). Solnit, in the following paragraph, brings the story back to a more personal reflection, to the story of her mother, and to the seeming inevitability that Solnit and her mother would fall short of the stories of how things should be, 'as told by my father, by society, by the church, by the happy flawless women of advertisements' (59).

Solnit has written elsewhere that, '[i]n essays, ideas are the protagonists, and they often develop much like characters down to the surprise denouement' (2005: 144) – itself a striking metaphor. Yet if ideas are the protagonists, the essaying 'I' is also a protagonist, because it is she who gathers, circulates, and circulates among these ideas. It is the essayist who moves through ideas as a kind of relational field. Solnit does this by drawing connections between concepts and across disciplines, bringing together a *Looney Tunes* cartoon and a long-dead Chinese artist in one breath. Leslie Jamison has described *The Faraway Nearby* as 'an experiment in applying the associative liberties of the essay genre to an entire book: accumulation, juxtaposition, the organizing possibilities of metaphor' (2013: n.p.). The text makes its meaning through accretion and association.

Ultimately, the 'Flight' chapter comes to reflect on the power of storytelling and its relationship to distance and proximity. 'Writing is saying to no one and to everyone the things it is not possible to say to someone […] Matters that are so subtle, so personal, so obscure, that I ordinarily can't imagine saying them to the people to whom I'm closest' (64). To write, Solnit says, is to 'have an intimacy with the faraway and distance from the near at hand' (65). So, what starts in solitude ends with a kind of communion. As Solnit puts it in another one of her shifting metaphors:

> The object we call a book is not the real book, but its potential, like a musical score or a seed. It exists fully only in the act of being read; and its real home is inside the head of the reader, where the symphony resounds, the seed germinates. A book is a heart that only beats in the chest of another. (63)

The Faraway Nearby is very much about the kinds of relationships we build with each other through storytelling. In weaving together myths, cartoons, and her own personal history, Solnit also weaves a story about the nature of storytelling itself. She writes, 'I am, we each are, the inmost of a series of Russian dolls; you who read are now encased within a layer I built for you, or perhaps my stories are now inside you' (191). Here she pulls the metaphor out from the figurative world and into the world we call real: 'We live as literally as that inside each other's thoughts and work, in this world that is being made all the time, by all of us' (191).

Beyond the level of the paragraph, the book also builds associations among chapters, with the work structured as a particular kind of journey: the journey into and out of a labyrinth. Like names of cities passed by on a journey out and then back, the titles of the chapters repeat in reverse order. The first chapters – 'Apricots', 'Mirrors', 'Ice', 'Flight' and 'Breath' – lead to the pivot chapters of 'Wound', 'Knot', and 'Unwound', which are then followed by the chapters of 'Breath', 'Flight', 'Ice', 'Mirrors' and

'Apricots' on the return journey. Solnit writes: 'The end of the journey through the labyrinth is not at the center, as is commonly supposed, but back at the threshold again: the beginning is also the real end' (188). By structuring the book as a journey, in which each part is passed through twice, Solnit also builds associative links between different parts of the book. In this regard, the book itself mirrors the structure of the classical labyrinth. It is, as Cynthia Ozick says of the essay form more generally, 'a stroll through someone's mazy mind' (1998: n.p.). In following Solnit in and out of this story, the reader seems to gain access to her labyrinthine mind.

Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* and *The Argonauts*

Nelson's work is often described as cross-genre, and *Bluets* and *The Argonauts* both demonstrate this quality, combining elements of memoir, essay, philosophy and cultural theory. Nelson herself has discussed how her writing engages in 'a sort of leaning against' (2012: 83) the ideas of others, which is evident in its citational engagement with them. Nelson's work regularly references that of others, making associations with writers, philosophers, and cultural critics. This relational quality is not about tradition or inheritance, Nelson says, because it 'takes place on a horizontal plane of action, not a vertical one. It brings one into the land of wild associations, rather than that of grim congenital lineage' (Ibid.: 88). Here I will examine how Nelson's use of fragments and citations make the work 'lean' in this way, and how this associative quality constructs the figure of the essaying 'I'.

Composed of paragraph-length fragments, *Bluets* is an investigation of the colour blue, a catalogue of heartbreak, and a philosophical grappling (continued in *The Argonauts*) with language's powers. The narrator examines her doomed love affair with an unnamed man known only as 'the prince of blue', who loves both the narrator and another woman. She also writes about visiting a friend who has been injured in a terrible accident. Most of the fragments are not narrative, however, but rather engage with philosophical ideas that cluster around certain themes. Nelson notes in an interview: 'While some of the fragments may seem disconnected or distinct, the truth is that they each had to fall into one the book's major categories, which included love, language, sex, divinity, alcohol, pain, death, and problems of veracity/perception' (2011: 160).

While this summary gives some sense of what *Bluets* is about, I am particularly interested in *how* Nelson writes about these topics, because, as Tredinnick says of lyric essay generally, 'to tell you what an essay is about is to tell you next to nothing about it' (62). In order to get a sense of how *Bluets* operates, it's necessary to understand how it juxtaposes sections. The book leans against Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, and structurally echoes its form by taking shape in 240 numbered sections (Nelson calls them 'propositions'), each a paragraph long. The paragraphs are separated by white space, like a section break. *Bluets* begins:

> 1. Suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with a color. Suppose I were to speak this as though it were a confession; suppose I shredded my napkin as we spoke. *It began slowly. An appreciation, an affinity. Then, one day, it became more serious. Then* (looking into an empty teacup, its bottom stained with thin brown excrement coiled into the shape of a sea horse) *it became somehow* personal.

> 2. And so I fell in love with a color—in this case, the color blue—as if falling under a spell, a spell I fought to stay under and get out from under, in turns. (1, original italics)

The propositions are generally brief, and there are often three or four of them to a page.

The work is associative in terms of how it situates fragments on the page, and in its use of citation. A description of Nelson's propositions 113-117 gives examples of both. Proposition 113 discusses an unfinished novel by Novalis in which the narrator dreams of a blue flower and then commits his life to searching for it (45). Proposition 114 includes a Dutch expression that translates as: 'Those are nothing but blue flowers', and then notes: 'In which case "blue flowers" means a pack of bald-faced lies' (45). Proposition 115 simply states: 'In which case seeking itself is a spiritual error' (46). Proposition 116 tells of the unnamed prince of blue visiting the narrator for one of the last times in a pale blue shirt. The two are intimate, and he tells the narrator that he is in love with both her and another woman. Proposition 117 is: '"How clearly I have seen my condition, yet how childishly I have acted," says Goethe's sorrowful young Werther. "How clearly I still see it, and yet show no sign of improvement"' (46). How is the reader to understand these gaps and associations? The essaying 'I' of *Bluets* questions her own motivations, asking whether she is 'trying, with these "propositions," to build some kind of bower?' (28). But then she immediately interrupts herself: '—But surely this would be a mistake. For starters, *words do not* look like *the things they designate* (Maurice Merleau-Ponty)' (28).

One commentator has said of Nelson's more recent book *The Argonauts* that if it 'eludes easy plot summary, it may be because the plot is not what anchors the book. What does instead is the character of Nelson's thought' (Donegan 2015: n.p.). This is true also of *Bluets*. But this elusive quality is, of course, common to the essay in general, and is in fact the 'essaying' that an essay always performs: an attempt to track the movement of a mind as it follows a line (or lines, or wild associations) of thinking, and the particular shape of this thinking is as much of a construction as any other form of characterisation.

Yet if this questioning and essaying 'I' is a form of characterization, it is important to heed Carl Klaus's reminder in *The Made-Up Self: Impersonation in the Personal Essay* that

> the 'person' in a personal essay is a written construct, a fabricated thing, a character of sorts – the sound of its voice a byproduct of carefully chosen words, its recollection of experience, its run of thought and feeling, much tidier than the mess of memories, thoughts, and feelings arising in one's consciousness. (2010: 1)

While Klaus uses the term 'personal essay' and I use 'lyric essay', this is a difference in terminology rather than of focus, because Klaus's analysis often turns to 'discontinuous' and fragmented forms, including *Bluets*. Klaus locates this form of roaming essayist in the long tradition reaching back to Montaigne, who, Klaus asserts, 'openly admitted that his way of writing is deliberately calculated to create the illusion of being a free and natural activity' (2010: 10). He cites Montaigne himself, who wrote, 'I go out of my way, but rather by license than carelessness. My ideas follow one

another, but sometimes it is from a distance, and look at each other, but with a sidelong glance' (qtd. in Klaus 2010: 10-11). This calculated waywardness in Nelson's work, I suggest, constructs an essaying 'I' who is not only trying to document experience, but is trying to build a framework for understanding it – and constantly revising, doubting, and reconsidering her approach.

The Argonauts is not fragmented to the same extent as *Bluets*. Instead it is tethered to the chronological narrative of Nelson's pregnancy, and examines Nelson's relationship with her fluidly gendered partner, Harry. The book draws on gender theory, poetry, psychoanalysis, art and philosophy to discuss ideas of gender, the maternal, queerness and bodies in transformation. The wildness of association here is in the mobility of the mind of the essaying 'I', who moves rapidly and unpredictably through complex ideas and major changes in her personal life across the span of the book. Here I want to particularly focus on her citation of other writers, and her inclusion of Harry's first-person account of his mother's death.

As with *Bluets*, *The Argonauts* shows us a wandering mind moving freely among a range of textual and theoretical domains. In this book, though, the style of citation is somewhat different. Nelson cites authors directly in two ways: sometimes she mentions them by name and introduces the quotation in the standard way, and at other times the author's name is not mentioned in the text, but the quotations are italicised. In these cases, which are numerous, the author's name only (no publication title or year) floats in the margin of the book. This recalls Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, in which Barthes draws on quotations from books and friends; in his introduction, he notes that these marginal notes are 'not authoritative but amical: I am not invoking guarantees, merely recalling, by a kind of salute given in passing, what has seduced, convinced, or what has momentarily given the delight of understanding' (2001 [1978]: 9). Nelson intertwines autobiography with critical theory and other literary works, and her marginal notes – citing D. W. Winnicott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Judith Butler, Leo Bersani, Sara Ahmed, Susan Sontag, and many others – indicate works influencing *The Argonauts*. In this we can see Nelson's interest in association, how the text leans against the ideas of others. Citation is an absolutely essential part of the work.

To say that Nelson leans against the writing of others is not to say she agrees (or disagrees) with them. She is more interested in the process of thinking and writing: 'I am interested in offering up my experience and performing my particular manner of thinking, for whatever they are worth' (97). But she is not interested in defending a stance:

> I have also never been less interested in arguing for the rightness, much less the righteousness, of any particular position or orientation. *What other reason is there for writing than to be traitor to one's own reign, traitor to one's own sex, to one's class, to one's majority? And to be a traitor to writing.* (97-98, original italics; italicised text is a quotation from Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet)

This is perhaps another thing that makes Nelson's associations between texts and ideas wild: her lack of interest in providing clear and direct lines of argument through them.

Instead, what she is constructing is the sense of a mind in motion, thinking through these issues. What she is building is less an argument and more a relational field.

Perhaps the most striking example of this relationality comes toward the end of the book, when Nelson is writing about the birth of her son Iggy. While she recounts the story of her labour, the narrative is interrupted not with the statements of other writers, but with a first-person account by Harry of the last hours of his mother's life and the first hours after her death. These entwined accounts of the process of birth and the process of death are extremely moving. Nelson first writes of the 'pain luge' of contractions: 'We talk. They tell me the contractions are slowing down, getting less powerful. This could go on for hours. They say maybe five more hours, or more, to get to ten centimeters. I don't want that. It has been twenty-four hours of labor, maybe a little more' (129). In the pages preceding this, Nelson writes of Harry's mother's cancer. These sections, as with many of the earlier parts of the book, directly address Harry: 'We'd been living together for just over a year when your mother received her diagnosis' (126). The address of a 'you' adds a sense of intimacy to these moments – the dedication of the book is 'for Harry', but it is also very much *to Harry* in places. What comes next, though, is surprising, as Harry narrates the last hours with his mother:

> on the last night, i put a pillow under her knees, and i told her i was going to take a walk. that i would smell honeysuckle and see fireflies, wet my shoes in midnight dew. i told her that i was going to do those things because i was going to stay on earth in this form. 'but your work here is done, mama.' i told her that she had set us all up with her love and her lessons. (129-130, original capitalisation)

This section of Harry's account ends with him telling his mother that it is okay to go, kissing her, caressing her, and falling asleep. In the very next paragraph, after a section break, we return to the scene of Nelson's labour. The labour has been in process for hours, and there are hours yet to come: 'It's very dark now. Harry and Jessica have fallen asleep. I am alone with the baby. I am trying to commit to the idea of letting him out. I still can't imagine it. But the pain keeps going deeper' (130). Eventually she is fully dilated. 'The midwife is ecstatic. Says we're ready to go. I want to know what will happen next. Just wait, they say' (131). And then, after a section break, we return to Harry's account of his mother's death: 'her eyes were looking at something in another place. her mouth needed less air, less often […] i never wanted it to end. i have never wanted infinity to open up under an instant like i wanted that then' (131-132). In the next section, Nelson recounts the final moments before Iggy's birth, and then the actual birth. Harry holds his new son and laughs. This is followed immediately by a return to the scene of Harry's mother's death, where he writes of how he stayed quietly with her body for some hours after she died.

Nelson's decision to make this section multi-voiced is striking. Life narratives are often accused of narcissism and selfishness, and yet here Nelson shows us their capacity for tremendous selflessness and expansiveness; at the moment when we might most expect Nelson to focus on her own experience, she instead draws in the stories of her partner and mother-in-law, and lets Harry speak directly to us in his own words. Here, the associative quality of the entwined first-person accounts constructs a narrator who recognises that her own life is intimately entwined with the lives (and deaths) of others.

She does this through a juxtaposition that works in significant part through what is left unsaid.

Association, Characterisation and the Figure of the Essaying 'I'

Like lyric poetry, from which it draws some of its techniques, lyric essay is concerned with ambiguity. Leslie Jamison notes that, '[a]s a genre grounded in productive uncertainty – collage rather than argument, exploration rather than assertion – the essay is constantly posing the conundrum of its own existence: What should an essay do? What should it offer?' (2013: n.p.). This echoes Tredinnick's point: 'What matters is not what an essay is about; what matters is how' (2011: 64). Jamison warns of the possible downsides of associative structures, noting how they can maintain

> a tenuous grasp on rigor and momentum. When does associative thinking feel productive – establishing important connections, peeling away layers, dissolving boundaries between registers – and when does it feel evasive, gliding over one idea too quickly in order to tackle the next? (2013: n.p.)

One answer might be that associative essay structures seem productive when the very structure of the essay is sympathetic with the preoccupations of the essayist. When Solnit uses long chains of analogies that then hook back to her original point, for instance, this associative structure brings to mind her suggestion that reading and writing make us Russian dolls, our stories nested within each other. When Nelson uses fragmentation to craft an essay that examines uncertainty and loneliness and heartbreak, the associative structure works in union with the topic. And when Nelson uses citation to fashion a shifting, multi-voiced examination of queer maternity and queer life more generally, this association works to convey not just the topic, but also a sense of the essaying 'I' who is shaped by both her critical engagement and her personal experience with others.

For Solnit's examination of storytelling, empathy and transformation in *The Faraway Nearby*, the associations wrought through analogy and metaphor give the essay a sense of motion, which connects with the image of the labyrinth as organising structure, as well as with Solnit's journey to Iceland. Occasionally, though, this sense of motion is interrupted when associations between concepts are less clear. An example of this is the first 'Ice' chapter, which tells the story of Mary Shelley's life and her writing of *Frankenstein*. While this chapter examines some of the key themes of *The Faraway Nearby*, such as the importance of self-knowledge, empathy, and storytelling, it focuses so much on Shelley that Solnit's attempts to link the chapter to the broader focus of the book are sometimes unconvincing. This chapter follows two others in which the life of the essaying 'I' has been the dominant focus, so the connection also feels tenuous because the shift in focus is so great. Later chapters tend to contain a more even blend of the stories of others with Solnit's own story. It might be that the 'wildness' of the associations is most productive when filtered through the focus of the essaying 'I'. This is particularly likely in the case of essays that examine the life of the essayist. In these cases, to lose sight of the essayist is to lose sight of what holds the essay together.

In comparison to Solnit's work, Nelson's work has less of a narrative through-line. This is particularly true of *Bluets*, where the propositions are held together not by narrative, but by the mobile mind of the essaying 'I' who crafts them. She is uncertain, playful, joking, mournful, curious, and insistently present. Any evasiveness in this book actually works to construct the essaying 'I', in part because she is so often addressing an absent 'you', the lost prince of blue. She also deliberately plays with uncertainty, counterarguments, and simply changing her mind. She begins some propositions: 'Then again' (56), or: 'On the other hand' (76); another states: 'I have enjoyed telling people I am writing a book about blue without actually doing it' (6). In this sense, she is not only building associations between the statements of the various authors and philosophers she quotes, but also between her own earlier statements. This gives a strong sense of unpredictable motion, as well as some sense of (also unpredictable) character. In *The Argonauts*, the use of citation shows us the essaying 'I' reflecting on maternity, marriage, and queer sexuality through the lens of critical theory.

As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point out: 'Since its development by Montaigne as a form of self-exploration engaging received wisdom, the essay has been a site of self-creation through giving one's perspective on the thoughts of others' (2001: 276). In this sense, essay is as relational as memoir and other forms of life narrative. Indeed, as Paul John Eakin states: 'the definition of autobiography, and its history as well, must be stretched to reflect the kind of self-writing in which relational identity is characteristically displayed' (1998: 63). In *The Faraway Nearby*, *Bluets* and *The Argonauts* this relational identity is shaped and demonstrated through reading and writing: through the essayist's incorporation of stories and research, through citing philosophers, critical theorists, songwriters, artists, poets and the lovers and friends of the essayist herself. Solnit and Nelson gather fragments from diverse fields and piece them together, a wilful meshing of domains that can be as descriptive as any other form of characterisation. Here, though, the characterisation is found in the character of thought itself: in how it leans, and with whom, and how it leaps and connects, and how it makes its wild associations.

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