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Writing the Womb, Writing the Wound: The Function of Vulnerability in Autotheory

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WRITING THE WOMB, WRITING THE WOUND:

THE FUNCTION OF VULNERABILITY IN AUTOTHEORY

By
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"I can write the wound, or I can put my finger to the wound, and that's where the healing takes place… You fix and heal by writing the wound—the hard spot. I write the wound with the hope that in that aperture I might help create a better place for us to live."

Cherríe Moraga

Table of Contents

Abstract

This thesis frames autotheory, a genre and practice of writing based in autobiographical and theoretical work, in the feminist genealogies established by Lauren Fournier and as a study in vulnerability. I revisit and reconsider Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* (1982) and Cherríe Moraga's *Waiting in the Wings: A Portrait of Queer Motherhood* (1997) in terms of contemporary conversation on autotheory that center on Nelson's popular memoir *The Argonauts* (2015), arguing that Lorde, Moraga, and Nelson practice autotheory by writing through physical and metaphorical wounds. This thesis considers how vulnerability is tied to the autotheoretical impulse by studying how three feminist writers practice autotheory in texts pointed to as forerunners to the genre: autotheory not only reveals vulnerability: it can only be accomplished through vulnerability. Chapter One considers how Lorde deconstructs and reconstructs mythology in *Zami* to learn how to accept vulnerability in search of new paradigms for women. Chapter Two argues that Moraga uses her past journal entries from her pregnancy and early motherhood to open a conversation with the self and write through her wounds to new apertures. Chapter Three considers recent conversation on *The Argonauts* and argues that Nelson's form not only makes room for citation, but also for narrative rupture where citation can no longer sustain or hide vulnerability. I use these three texts to show how the autotheoretical impulse arises where structural vulnerabilities and personal vulnerabilities collide, like motherhood as understood through Adrienne Rich's definitions of institution and experience.

Introduction: Women's Life-Writing, or Autotheory by Other Names

Women's life-writing often deals with deeply personal wounds, both metaphorical and in physical flesh and blood. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa have both described their creative and theoretical work as "writing the wound," or writing about topics that are painful, problematic, or unresolved ("Cherríe Moraga" 169*).* By writing through wounds, Moraga and other writers can expose and explore them—whether personal, political, cultural, or otherwise—and begin the work of healing. Moraga's process of writing through wounds is one way that life-writing can turn into autotheory by using that lived experience to create new visions, new theories, and new apertures. Autotheory, as the word implies, employs autobiographical work and theoretical work together. Considering autotheory as genre, practice, and impulse, I argue that Cherríe Moraga, Audre Lorde, and Maggie Nelson, incorporate autotheory through both direct, theoretical commentary *and* the anecdotal, the bodily, and the bloody that women have used to theorize for decades, if not centuries.

This thesis revisits and reconsiders Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* (1982) and Moraga's *Waiting in the Wings: A Portrait of Queer Motherhood* (1997) in terms of contemporary conversations on autotheory that center on Nelson's popular text *The Argonauts* (2015). All three of these women theorize through their own flesh as well as the creation of flesh during pregnancy and motherhood. Writing the wound and writing the womb can be one in the same, but both are foregrounded by and exposed through vulnerability. By writing about wounds and wombs, both physical and metaphorical, women including Lorde, Moraga, and Nelson are engaging with and contributing to the history of autotheory by women.

Where did autotheory come from? Nelson's popular memoir[1] *The Argonauts* is deemed "autotheory" on its back cover, but the term was not in circulation in the 1980s when Lorde published her "biomythography" *Zami,* nor in the 1990s when Moraga published her diary-based memoir *Waiting in the Wings.* But the practice of theorizing through flesh and blood is not new: in their revolutionary anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), Moraga and Anzaldúa title the second section "Theory in the Flesh" to highlight writings that use physical realities and "flesh and blood experiences" to theorize (Moraga and Anzaldúa 19). Stacey Young, often cited as coining the term autotheory, points to *This Bridge Called My Back* as a potential autotheoretical work in her book *Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics, and the Feminist Movement* (1997) (*Autotheory* 24). What critics now refer to as autotheory has been discussed under many other names: autocritique, critical memoir, theoretical fiction, life-thinking, fiction-theory, *testimonio*, Sidonie Smith's term "autobiographical manifesto," Domna C. Stanton's term "autogynography," or Lorde's "biomythography" (*Autotheory* 7, Smith and Watson 20, 26). *The Argonauts* may have popularized autotheory, but Nelson admits to pulling the word from Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (2013).

In life-writing and autobiography studies, the publication of *The Argonauts* renewed conversation and debate over practices and genealogies of writing that engage both theory and the self, particularly by women. As Robyn Wiegman explains in her introduction to *Arizona Quarterly*'s recent special issue on autotheory,

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[1] *The Argonauts* and *Waiting in the Wings* have often been called "memoir." Colloquially, autobiography is typically a life-writing text that covers most or all of an individual's life, while a memoir typically considers a more limited timeframe and/or theme. In this thesis I use the word "autobiography" loosely, in a similar sense to "life-writing," covering a broad spectrum of autobiographical writing (as also seen in, for instance, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (1998).

> [T]he burgeoning attention to autotheory carries no collectively assumed aesthetic, historical, or theoretical definition. On the contrary, the picture that is emerging—through dissertations, undergraduate and MA theses, conference sessions, blogs, author interviews, marketing material, and a handful of published essays—demonstrates a variety of critical investments in the concept as commentators emphasize different aspects of the term's hybridity. (Wiegman 7)

In this special issue and elsewhere, critics emphasize different aspects of autotheoretical texts: Lauren Fournier focuses on feminist practices of writing and art, Carolyn Laubender considers the autotheoretical potential of psychoanalysis, Ralph Clare historizes autotheory through the rise and fall of 'high' theory in academia, and Arianne Zwartjes considers the difficulties inherent in categorizing a term as broad as autotheory. The most thorough study so far, alongside the *Arizona Quarterly* issue, is Fournier's book *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2021) where she traces a feminist genealogy of autotheoretical work through art, literature, theory, and social media. The definitions and genealogy of autotheory I put forth here are greatly indebted to Fournier's work[2].

Fournier describes a "unique history of autotheory as a contemporary, post-1960s mode of artistic practice that is indebted to histories of feminist writing and activism" (*Autotheory* 3). Theorizing from the first person is reminiscent of, if not descended from, second-wave tenets like 'the personal is political' and 'consciousness raising' that are "conscious of the ways in which so-called personal issues [are], in fact, structural and systemic" ("Sick Women" 11). The

[2] Fournier's book was just recently published in late February 2021. My early investigations into autotheory relied on Fournier's 2018 essay "Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice."

"feminist genealogy" of autotheory looks to writings and other creative expressions through the late twentieth century:

> Indeed, the history of feminism is, in a sense, a history of autotheory—one that actively seeks to bridge theory and practice and upholds tenets like 'the personal is political.' As an impulse, autotheory can be traced through early feminist conceptual art, video art, performance, and body art, as well as cross-genre writings by women of color, such as Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Sylvia Wynter, and bell hooks. (*Autotheory* 8)

Autotheory can be looked at as a genre, practice, or, as Fournier writes above, an impulse. The phrase autotheoretical impulse seems to best capture the autotheory's cross-genre, hybrid, personal nature, and connects autotheory-as-genre to a broad network of writings and art. As a feminist practice, autotheory considers how personal experience and collective politics are, as Clare writes, "inextricably linked" (Clare 90). Zwartjes seconds this notion writing, "In many ways, autotheory engenders collectivist, rather than individualist, worldviews; it uses theory to recognize the power of shared connection, shared experience, in a fragmented and isolated time" (Zwartjes). Although autotheory requires autobiographical influence, it is also often invested in communal experience and has the potential to reveal structural oppressions and systemic patterns. One way that autotheory accomplishes feminist work is through formal and informal citation, recognizing that theoretical work does not occur in a political or cultural vacuum.

Autotheory is defined by a sense of embodied writing that acknowledges the specifics of the body and identity of the writer: "Work in the genre of autotheory takes one's *embodied experiences* as a primary text or *raw material* through which to *theorize, process, and reiterate* theory to feminist effects" ("Sick Women" 645-646; emphasis added). In this sense, autotheoretical writing refuses to ignore the reality that thinking and writing are done by *subjects*

with *bodies*, and therefore theoretical thinking can never be entirely detached from the body or subjective experience. If autotheory is a practice that originates in feminism, particularly by women of color, queer women, mothers, and disabled or chronically ill individuals, it follows that the body can never be removed from the work. Fournier "approach[es] autotheory as a provocation" is considering the lack of embodiment in much academic writing: "The very integration of *auto* or *autos*, the self, with *theory* into a single term is contentious, especially in light of the historical disparagement of self-reflective work as a supposedly narcissistic and therefore nonintellectual or fundamentally uncritical mode—and especially when the work is made by women and people of color" (*Autotheory* 6). When the *auto* is both working in tandem with and grating against *theory*, the body becomes part of the raw materials that inform theoretical thinking:

> there is a certain rebelliousness to working in the realm of autotheory: an assertive disregard of genre, category, boundary; a willingness to take on established fields of theoretical work and to say, we are body as much as we are brain. As such, autotheory could be seen as a methodology, a way of using bodily experience to gather knowledge. (Zwartjes)

The body and lived experience become additional ways of gathering knowledge and interpreting the world, a new source for citation. Using one's own experience as a source of citation can elevate the importance of self-reflective work and be a radical act of self-care and assertion.

Writers like Fournier and Clare also consider autotheory as reactionary to the status of theory in academia: "Autotheory... is both a response to and a result of critical theory's institutionalization and supposed death" (Clare 89). Fournier defines "theory" as associated with the tripartite lineages of "'Marxism, psychoanalysis, and structuralism,'" and "the

poststructuralist work of Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Althusser, Baudrillard, and others" and she also considers how "Fredric Jameson locates the discursive shift from 'philosophy' to 'theory' in the 1960s, when postmodernism wrought its many ontological and epistemological changes" (*Autotheory* 51-52). Fournier's understanding places shifts philosophy and theory as contemporary to, or just narrowly preceding, second-wave feminist art and writings that gained popularity through the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. When considering autotheory as a feminist practice or even mode of resistance, it is necessary to recognize the institutionalization of theory in academia and the problematic ways in which theory can claim to be objective:

> Historically, for one's work to be considered intellectual and critical, as a philosopher, historian, critic, or professor, one had to have an air of objective authority. Men who are Euro-American, upper class, not racialized, and at least heterosexual-passing tended to be considered critical and intellectual, while women, people of color, Indigenous people, poor and working-class people, non-university- or college-educated people, and others were historically abjected from that realm because of their assumedly uncritical hypersubjectivity and embodiment—a problem that continues through to the present day mobilizations of the notion of identity politics. The very notion of theoretical abstraction, or vacuumed *rigor* that exists for its own ends and apart from any particular body is a masculine—even macho—white, colonist ideal. (*Autotheory* 47)

The academy's long-standing emphasis on "vacuumed *rigor*" threatens to erase anyone embracing an identity or experience that falls outside of who is considered capable of objective, intellectual work. Fournier importantly historicizes the (lack of) intersectionality and presumption of objectivity in critical theory from the 1970s to 1990s, where "critical race, feminist, and queer theory are something ontologically different from 'theory' properly

understood: they are posited as a form of 'cultural studies' that, at best, is a kind of 'low theory'" (*Autotheory* 53). By offering another way of doing theory that recognizes subjectivity, intersectionality, and the messiness of identity and body, autotheory responds to theoretical work that attempts to erase the subjective nature of thinking. Autotheory, especially in the marginal-citation format that Nelson uses, leans into knowledge of critical theories and the ubiquity of heavy-weight names and quotations in literary, art, and cultural studies, but other forms of autotheory can be a response to, or way around, the institutionalization of theory as a means of gatekeeping or even silencing.

Autotheory offers a renewed form for reinstating identity into intellectual work: "[f]eminist autotheory positions subject-centered work *as* theory using a range of tactics and strategies" (*Autotheory* 54). These tactics and strategies vary widely, which is part of why subject-centered autotheory can be so hard to categorize (and, perhaps an argument against categorization altogether). Authors might incorporate the body through details of flesh and blood, moments of intimacy or moments of visceral disgust. Authors might also play with form and voice, using poetic or fragmented language or incorporating other voices, like Moraga with her diary entries or Nelson's incorporated quotations. Autotheory "strips the pretension of neutrality, of objectivity, away from the theorizing voice" and instead, uses the presence of the writer—the self—to its advantage (Zwartjes). Wiegman explains that "By challenging humanism's faith in individual agency and autonomy, critical theory has insisted on analyzing 'the subject,' not 'the self,' and has approached this figure not only as a historical invention but as the most powerful of all modern fictions" (Wiegman). Autotheory's strength is not only in recognizing subjectivity, but in engaging with the self *as* subject.

I pick up Lorde, Moraga, and Nelson, in part, for how they are consistently mentioned as precursors or practitioners of autotheory, with relatively little time spent on literary and critical analysis about *how* or *why* their works exercise the autotheoretical impulse. The three texts I have chosen—*Zami, Waiting in the Wings,* and *The Argonauts*—present distinctive formal approaches, varied voices, and different generations of feminist writers. These texts are also unapologetically intimate, vulnerable, and deliberate. They mourn and celebrate bodies, experiment with identity, and insist on bringing the personal to the public. Kyle C. Frisina argues that autotheory "exemplif[ies] what feminists have long insisted: theory and politics are intimate and embodied. And autotheoretical texts make particularly radical interventions when the perspectives they represent have historically been marginalized: it's about me, they insist, once and for all" (Frisina 158). Lorde, Moraga, and Nelson all practice autotheory, and that the autotheoretical impulse hinges on the function of vulnerability in writing. Writers render themselves vulnerable by including the self that is so often expunged from theoretical work: autotheory accomplishes its unique task by insisting on vulnerability.

The Function of Vulnerability in Autotheory

Kaye Mitchell considers multiple forms of vulnerability—emotional, physical, of gender, and of the writer—in her essay "'Feral with Vulnerability': on *The Argonauts*." Along the same lines as Fournier's work, Mitchell suggests that vulnerability is a primary aspect of feminist writing: "In writing *of* and *through* and *in* vulnerability, Nelson contributes to a heterogeneous 'tradition' of feminist art that might include Chris Kraus's attempt to 'handle vulnerability like philosophy, at some remove'" (Mitchell 196). It is from both Mitchell and Nelson that I form a study of autotheory based on the function of vulnerability, considering how Lorde, Moraga, and

Nelson express the autotheoretical impulse in moments where structural and personal vulnerability collide. While each author cannot necessarily choose the vulnerabilities that affect her in life, each chooses to write herself into vulnerability. Autotheory is not just accomplished by making oneself vulnerable through language: the subject experiences vulnerability and uses the autotheoretical impulse as a way to write herself both *into* and *out of* vulnerability.

I use the phrase "structural vulnerability" to describe vulnerabilities that are created, sustained, or otherwise influenced by systematic and systemic oppressions. I pull this term from Nelson, who describes stepparenting as a "structurally vulnerable" position:

> When you are a stepparent, no matter how wonderful you are, no matter how much love you have to give, no matter how mature or wise or successful or smart or responsible you are, you are structurally vulnerable to being hated or resented, and there is precious little you can do about it, save endure, and commit to planting seeds of sanity and good spirit in the face of whatever shitstorms may come your way. And don't expect to get any kudos from the culture, either: parents are Hallmark-sacrosanct, but stepparents are interlopers, self-servers, poachers, pollutants, and child molesters (Nelson 21)

Because of their "interloping" status in the nuclear, heterosexual family, stepparents experience social and legal structural vulnerabilities: Moraga and Nelson both explore how their status as stepparent affects their understanding of identity and ability to parent. Other structural vulnerabilities, particularly in the United States where Lorde, Moraga, and Nelson write, may include race, class, womanhood, queerness, disability, illness, and motherhood among others. The autotheoretical impulse arises most acutely where these structural vulnerabilities meet the personal, the intimate, and the unexpected. Mitchell mentions authors and artists who

> explore and document (rather than 'confess') experiences of romantic injury and vulnerability, shame, and self-abasement. In connecting these experiences to the structural conditions of gendered vulnerability by situating their work in relation to a tradition of feminine and feminist self-exposure, such works touch on a 'primary vulnerability' with very particular social and cultural consequences for those gendered or addressed women. (Mitchell 197)

Mitchell is already attuned to the particular "gendered vulnerability" that arises in the feminist traditions of self-focused writing and art. In a cultural imagination that often considers women to be emotional, irrational, or otherwise unfit for public intellectual work, purposefully exposing vulnerability or shame can be a radical act of self-disclosure or self-insertion. Autotheoretical work, as Mitchell says of the *The Argonauts*, "reveals the vulnerability of the writer, particularly the writer who puts herself, her personal experiences and feelings, into her work—'contaminating' that work, and making herself open to shaming' (Mitchell 196). Self-exposure makes the writer open to additional consequences of writing, both negative and positive.

Autotheoretical writing renders the writer vulnerable—open to shaming or praise for their intimate work—and also hinges on the presence of vulnerability itself. Erin Gilson, in her article "Vulnerability, Ignorance, and Oppression" considers vulnerability not as a simply negative (or positive) state, but as

> a basic kind of openness to being affected and affecting in both positive and negative ways, which can take diverse forms in different social situations (for example, bodily, psychological, economic, emotional, and legal vulnerabilities)...

> Vulnerability is not just a condition that limits us but one that can *enable* us. As potential, vulnerability is a condition of openness, openness to being affected and affecting in turn. (Gilson 310)

Vulnerability is not a limiting condition, but a condition of openness. When a writer chooses to display their vulnerabilities, they enable all the negative and positive potentials of openness. I argue that this choice of vulnerability is what connects autotheory to feminist work that is "conscious of the ways in which so-called personal issues [are], in fact, structural and systemic" (*Autotheory* 11). The autotheoretical impulse is most intense where structural vulnerabilities and personal vulnerabilities collide, requiring the writer to make space in their language and narratives for openness, or even rupture. Autotheory not only *reveals* vulnerability: it can only be accomplished *through* vulnerability.

Structural Vulnerability in Motherhood

Vulnerability can certainly have negative consequences, like the potential for shaming that Mitchell discusses in the passage quoted above. In a patriarchal society where independence, self-reliance, and self-assuredness are privileged, vulnerability can be read as weakness, instability, or deficiency. Suzanne Bost writes in her study on motherhood and disability that the "modern American subject" is expected to have "individual integrity, self-reliance" and "reason" (Bost 164). These characteristics are "not conducive" to "our permeability as bodies and as subjects," especially in the face of vulnerable positionality, such as disability or motherhood (Bost 164). Lorde, Moraga, and Nelson each explore their relationships to motherhood as a position that is structurally vulnerable in body, identity, and institution, as well as how motherhood *demands* vulnerability. In the most positive sense, this demand enables openness to

change, to loving, and to interdependence. At worst, structures leave mothers open to bodily wounding, cultural shaming, and other consequences.

Lorde, Moraga, and Nelson write about moments in their lives where the structural and systemic crash into the personal and the bodily. As queer women, all three writers consider the ways that gender and sexuality influence their positionality in a heteronormative and patriarchal United States. Lorde, as a Black woman and child of Caribbean immigrants, and Moraga, as a Chicana woman deeply connected to her Mexican American family, struggle with their multicultural, intersectional identities, racism in the United States, and the unique patriarchal constraints of multiple cultures. All three writers consider how motherhood and maternity changes their bodies and identities. In the first part of *Zami*, Lorde closely studies her relationship with her mother, Linda, and later processes the bodily and emotional pain of an abortion. Moraga struggles to understand tension between her butch lesbian identity and her maternal body, both internally and in public. Nelson similarly considers her own conceptions of gender and identity as her body transforms through pregnancy and her partner, Harry, begins his gender transition. Alongside structural vulnerabilities of gender, race, and sexuality, each of these women consider how the institutionalization of motherhood in a patriarchal and heteronormative United States, demands, celebrates, and sometimes disrespects the vulnerability of motherhood.

In *Of Woman Born* (1976), Adrienne Rich puts forth two definitions of motherhood, "one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of the reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (Rich 13). Considering motherhood as both *institution* and *experience*, motherhood and maternity are apt subjects in studying the confluence

of *structural* and *personal* vulnerability. Mothers are structurally vulnerable to the institution of motherhood and their bodies are structurally vulnerable to the experience of pregnancy and birth. However, each woman also has a deeply personal and individual experience of motherhood under this institution. Even in theorizing on motherhood, Rich confesses to an autotheoretical impulse tied into her work:

> It seemed to me impossible from the first to write a book of this kind without being often autobiographical, without often saying 'I.' Yet for many months I buried my head in historical research and analysis in order to delay or prepare the way for the plunge into areas of my own life which this book has come. I believe increasingly that only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will truly be ours" (Rich 15-16).

Rich readily admits that the material of her research and writing cannot be separated from her own life, but rather than being detrimental to her work, this entwinement becomes a powerful sentiment about communal experience.

The institution of motherhood presents a problem for Lorde, Moraga, and Nelson as feminist writers and queer women. Rich explains that the institution of motherhood perpetuates and preserves heteronormative and patriarchal interests: "Certainly the mother serves the interests of patriarchy: she exemplifies in one person religion, social conscience, and nationalism. Institutional motherhood revives and renews all other institutions" (Rich 45). As women interested in dismantling systems of oppression intersecting under religion, social conscience, and nationalism, Lorde, Moraga, and Nelson share a sense of discomfort with, if not direct aversion from, the institutionality of motherhood and its structural role in society. Rich argues, "Patriarchy could not survive without motherhood and heterosexuality in their

institutional forms; therefore, they have to be treated as axioms, as 'nature' itself, not open to question except where, from time to time and place to place, 'alternate life-styles' for certain individuals are tolerated" (Rich 43). Patriarchal conceptions assume heterosexual motherhood as the natural state for all women, and those who do not fall under the established categories may or may not be tolerated. "The experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have both been channeled to serve male interests" and as queer women who come to have children through different means, their "behavior[s] threatens the institution" as "illegitimacy, abortion, lesbianism, [are] considered deviant or criminal" for undermining how the institution is formed to support patriarchal interests (Rich 42). Lorde, Moraga, and Nelson are structurally vulnerable under our institutional conception of motherhood, and they experience this vulnerability both internally and through interactions with heteronormative and homophobic forces, from hospital paperwork to Proposition 8 in California. In considering vulnerability as a principle of autotheoretical thought, motherhood, and queer motherhood in particular, becomes an apt place for considering how vulnerability spurs, complicates, and performs autotheoretical work.

Autotheory requires an understanding of vulnerability in order to function as a practice, and the impulse seems to begin in the need to write through vulnerability. This thesis considers how vulnerability is tied to the autotheoretical *impulse* by studying how three feminist writers *practice* autotheory in texts pointed to as forerunners to the *genre*. Each author takes up the task differently, speaking through and about the self in their own particular voices.

My first chapter considers Audre Lorde's "biomythography" *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* and how Lorde's unique approach to language through an arc of identity formation leads to mythological creations of the self, or autotheorizing through myth. In a text that combines autobiography, myth, fictionality, and poetic language, Lorde spins a conversation between a

poetic self and a theoretical self as she revisits various scenes from her childhood and early adulthood. Only through realizations of mythic proportions and miniscule offerings of vulnerability does she come to learn paradigms where achieving Zami, a Carriacou word for women who work together as friends and lovers, is possible through openness.

The second chapter explores Moraga's diary-based memoir *Waiting in the Wings: A Portrait of Queer Motherhood*. Moraga uses her diary entries to create a conversation between a past and current self as she unpacks how motherhood influences her identity, family, and writing. Moraga walks through the conflicts she feels between her butch lesbian identity and maternal identity, and how she learns to accept the vulnerability and permeability that her maternal subject position requires. The vulnerability of the mind and permeability of the body that motherhood demands changes the way that Moraga approaches writing, even if she continues to write her wounds and wound herself.

The final chapter considers Nelson's *The Argonauts* and its position in the feminist genealogy of autotheoretical writing. This text in many ways feels like a rewriting of *Waiting in the Wings*: like Moraga, Nelson considers how her queer identity and experiences of motherhood with a transgender partner all collide. Situating her individual storytelling among constant references to artists, writers, theorists, academics, friends, and her partner Harry, Nelson practices autotheory formally with her marginal citations. However, she also practices autotheory through radical vulnerability, allowing readers a (negotiated) glimpse at the most intimate moments of motherhood and family.

These texts present a case study in how vulnerability functions in writing and in the body, which in turn shows that the body and writing are inextricably linked. Vulnerability becomes a function of autotheory, and autotheory presents a method for claiming the value of vulnerability.

Chapter 1: Mythic Constructions of the Self in Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

Audre Lorde opens *Zami* with a question that poses subjectivity through bodily metaphor: "*To whom do I owe the power behind my voice, what strength I have become, yeasting up like sudden blood from under the bruised skin's blister?*" (*Zami* 3). Lorde's subjectivity is not just personal but communal and relational: from whom does her strength and voice come? "Become," too, suggests that the strength to speak is a continual process where Lorde must write through bruised and blistered skin. Lorde's practice of autotheory begins with these questions of becoming: becoming herself, becoming her voice and strength, becoming *Zami.* From the first sentence, Lorde's autobiographical writing is poetic and bodily, emphasizing communal relations and physical pain in the building of individual subjectivity. The processes of becoming and of writing require openness, or vulnerability.

In this chapter, I argue that Lorde's unique approach to language through an arc of identity formation leads to mythological creations of the self, or autotheorizing through myth. Lorde's experiences as a Black, queer woman continually confront white, patriarchal and heteronormative structures and provide raw material for language that theorizes and speaks to multiplicities of identity. Lorde uses mythology as a technique to close and open herself to painful and joyous experiences. But before we get to the practice of autotheory—Lorde writing her processes of becoming—I'd like to explore *Zami* in terms of genre.

What is biomythography?

Lorde labels *Zami* as biomythography, implying a genre-bending, uncategorizable position. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Lorde states that biomythography "is really fiction"

with “the elements of biography and history of myth. In other words, it’s fiction built from many sources” (“Audre Lorde” 115). The emphasis on fiction complicates autobiographic readings, yet Lorde states, “You might call *Zami* a novel. I don’t like to call it that,” distancing the text from fiction (“Audre Lorde” 115). Reading *Zami* as an autobiographical novel is not enough. Reading it as fiction, nonfiction, or myth is not enough. What does it mean to read Lorde’s biomythography as autotheory?

Most, if not all critics who discuss *Zami* address the issue of genre—some in a sentence, some across several pages—but many critics later refer to *Zami* as Lorde’s “autobiography,” “biography,” or even “memoir” in the same books and articles. Critics also emphasize different components of biomythography’s definition. Bethany Jacobs writes that “Lorde does not describe her text as an autobiography proper, but as an infusion of myth and memory” that “should complicate scholarly readings” (Jacobs 112-113). Chinosole argues for studying *Zami* alongside Lorde’s poetry because the “autobiographical prose” is “explicitly mythical and fictional” through “meshing of history and myth, prose and poetry” (Chinosole 383). And as Claudine Raynaud says, “From the start, the question of the authenticity of autobiographical reconstruction becomes secondary. Lorde is not faithfully telling her life story: she is giving herself a new name; she is telling the story of Zami” (Raynaud 221). *Zami* is not necessarily about Lorde herself, but rather the vulnerabilities that Lorde *chooses* to expose to her reader. The emphasis on myth and fiction complicates the “issue” of authenticity inherent in life-writing, raising questions often asked by readers of autobiography: how much of these scenes are truthful? How much is exaggeration or fiction? In a biomythography, in which moments does Lorde mythologize her own experience, or is the entire text a mythology?

A text self-described as biomythography offers a unique discussion within autotheory, as autotheory does not lay a particular claim to authenticity that the term autobiography historically implies. While I hesitate to use the term 'authenticity' in relation to autobiography at all—as Raynaud shows, autobiography is recreation and is therefore subjective—framing Lorde's text as biomythography loosens the grasp of claims to authenticity, or exactness, or even truthfulness that could have limited the expansive aims explored in *Zami*, as biomythography "is one way of expanding our vision" (*Zami* 115). Reading *Zami* under the lens of autobiography or autotheory does not alter or diminish the text's claims to genre-bending or fictionality, as autotheory is not only genre but practice, and can therefore be found in a multitude of 'distinct' genres.

Does autotheory require an assumption of authenticity? Raynaud writes, "Although traditionally defined as nonfiction, autobiography is the telling of a story, the re-creation in words of self, the invention of a narrative of the past. In the face of this questioning of the truth-value of autobiographical discourse, 'authenticity' has to be redefined in the context of myth" (Raynaud 222). Raynaud does not specifically define a new understanding of authenticity but does suggest that "[i]n a sense, the political implications of myth are to be understood as the reality that myth actualized for traditional societies" (Raynaud 222). If biography is understood to be factual, the equal valuing of myth in *Zami* complicates the text by introducing what might—too simply—be considered fiction. But what Raynaud is suggesting is that myth in *Zami* functions as "the reality" that has been "actualized" in the past. I interpret this actualization to mean that myth functions as a perception of so-called objective reality: myth-based perceptions are authenticated and actualized through myth's status in our public understanding.

Many critics either take up Lorde's revisionist mythmaking or expand on Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic," including critics Sharon P. Holland, Bethany Jacobs, Stephanie Li, Ahn

Hau, Elizabeth Alexander, and notably AnaLouise Keating in her book *Women Reading, Women Writing*. Jacobs uses the essay to consider the "Erotic Mother" in *Zami*, "a figure or essence rather than a strictly literal person" who "embraces sex and nurturance in equal measure" while resisting cultural narratives that reduce Black women to "sexless maternal tropes" (Jacobs 110). In *Zami,* Lorde's mother Linda is a complicated figure that dominates Lorde's childhood in the first half of the text, and her influence stays with Lorde long into adulthood. Jacob argues that *Zami* can be a "mythological source material" for better understanding Lorde's evocation of the erotic as a creative force and, "most radically," Lorde's erotic maternal practice that "transforms the mother figure in Zami from a repository of power, love, and labor for others into a powerful and generative resource for the self" (*Zami* 114). Keating claims that Lorde uses West African myths to decenter Western Judeo-Christian myths and reimagine myths as woman-centered, writing, "I see Lorde's transformational epistemology and her revisionist mythmaking as important dimensions of her own political activism. She incorporates her Afrocentric perspective in both her theory of the erotic and her revisionist myths, reconstructing a tradition that Judeo-Christian belief systems has almost entirely erased" (Keating 48). While other critics study Lorde's revisionist mythmaking in *Zami*, I am interested in how Lorde is not just revising or erasing myths but creating her own.

Extrapolating on Lorde's theories of the erotic or revisionist mythmaking might already be enough to claim that Lorde is practicing autotheory as she explores new theoretical paradigms for Black women to claim their own histories and sexualities. However, Lorde is doing more than revising existing myths or her existing theoretical work: she is mythologizing through lived experience to speak to both identity and theory. *Zami* is both autobiographical and fictional, and I argue that the combination of these practices follows the creation of modern mythology that

Roland Barthes lays out in "Myth Today," in *Mythologies* (1957). Myth can help put the subjective—the self—back into theory.

Mythmaking in Zami

Considering *Zami* as biomythography, where the text is participating in both fiction and truth, lived and imagined experience, there is an impulse to try to peel the layers of truth out of *Zami*'s scenes: did Linda actually construct these mythological unrealities, or does Lorde create or exaggerate them in her writing? Does Linda ignore racism, classism, and sexism to protect her daughters, or protect herself? A solution to these quandaries of truth-telling, or in this case, myth-telling, is to view Lorde as spinning mythology—a creation or study of myth—while Lorde is a (bio)mythographer who records, and perhaps edits, these mythologies.

Mythology can function as a linguistic and social tool that can create, sustain, or deconstruct. In "Myth Today," Roland Barthes expands on Ferdinand de Saussure's study of semiology to claim that myth is a "*second-order semiological system*" (Barthes 223). In the first order system that creates language, the signifier and the signified together create the sign, "the associative total of the first two terms" (Barthes 221). On the level of myth, however, the first sign is taken as the signifier in the second order system. Barthes invokes mythology's role in hierarchies of power and constructions of race with his most well-known mythological example, a young Black soldier on the cover of a magazine, saluting what is presumably a French flag. Barthes explores the significations of the image: "that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors" (Barthes 225). Mythology helps sustain power hierarchies and systemic

inequality, rewriting public perception of the realities of racial discrimination and national and colonial powers. In this way, mythology can render individuals vulnerable and invulnerable.

To understand how Lorde creates her own mythological identities, I begin with the ways in which Linda deconstructs and reconstructs various mythologies. Lorde's identity and positionality as a Black child, and later young woman, in 1940s and 50s Harlem is marked by modern mythologies of race and gender, but also by the personal mythologies (re)written by her mother, Linda. Linda either ignores or deconstructs the mythological systems that signify typical realities of race and class in Harlem in order to build new mythologies intended to protect herself and her daughters. However, Linda's unique mythological worldbuilding creates alternative structures that, rather than prepare her daughters to face the realities of a racist, sexist, heteronormative world, disillusion them and make them ill-prepared by preventing any expressions of vulnerability.

Lorde remembers, as a child, being spit on in the street. Linda explains these instances away as people "spit[ting] into the wind no matter where they went, impressing upon [Lorde] that this humiliation was totally at random" (*Zami* 17-18). Lorde only questions Linda's explanation years later, asking, "Have you noticed that people don't spit into the wind so much the way they used to?" (*Zami* 18). She continues:

> the look on my mother's face told me that I have blundered into one of those secret places of pain that must never be spoken of again. But it was so typical of my mother when I was young that if she couldn't stop white people from spitting on her children because they were Black, she would insist it was something else. It was so often her approach to the world; to change reality. If you can't change reality, change your perceptions of it (*Zami* 18).

Linda takes mythological systems that she cannot accept—that Black individuals, even children, are purposely spit on in the streets—and changes their signification, or changes them into acts with no signification at all. This erasure creates a potentially dangerous vacuum. Racism must never be spoken of in Linda's house: Lorde describes it as a secret place of pain. Barthes writes that "mythical signification... is never arbitrary; it is always in part motivated, and unavoidably contains some analogy" (Barthes 236). Spitting on someone functions as a mythological hate act: it is non-arbitrary and highly motivated. By refusing to recognize this mythology, Linda returns a purposeful, myth-based act to the level of arbitrariness that language exists on.

Linda's deconstructive ignorance both contradicts and augments larger social constructions, or mythologies, of race. Lorde writes, "All our storybooks were about people who were very different from us. They were blond and white… Nobody wrote stories about us, but still people always asked my mother for directions in a crowd" (*Zami* 18). It was the perception of her mother's power, by both Lorde and by strangers, that made Lorde "decide as a child we must be rich, even when my mother did not have enough money to buy gloves for her hands" (*Zami* 18). Lorde intuitively recognizes the intersections of race, class, and power and the confusion that results in public readings of her mother's identity: if they are not white, they must be wealthy, because where else would Linda's power come from? Strangers stop Linda on the street to ask questions, or in the supermarket to ask her opinion on fish and the butcher, building a mythology of Linda's strength, or power, or stability. Lorde writes, "My mother was invested in this image of herself also, and took pains, I now realize, to hide from us as children the many instances of her powerlessness. Being Black and foreign and female in New York City in the twenties and thirties was not simple, particularly when she was quite light enough to pass for white, but her children weren't" (*Zami* 17). Linda's white-passing and "imposing, no-nonsense

exterior" allow her to build a mythology of strength that disorients Lorde's understanding of what it means to be a poor, Black woman in the United States (*Zami* 17).

This mythology moves from the level of storytelling to the level of language, challenging Lorde's ability to navigate a racist world. In second grade Lorde hears her older sisters discuss the word "*colored*," and reflects "[t]hat was the first time and only time my sisters and I discussed race as a reality in my house, or at any rate applied it to ourselves" (*Zami* 58-59). The girls cannot exactly describe what "colored" means: although Lorde's older sisters assume the word applies to Lorde—who has the darkest skin in her family—they cannot decide how to describe Linda. Linda builds a mythological persona to protect both herself and her children, but by disrupting the mythologies that sustain racism—without the ability to dismantle systemic and individual racism—Linda erases the non-arbitrary and purposive nature of social myths.

Lorde's relationship to language reflects the gaps or silences in realities that Linda refused to name as well as the secret poetries of a far-off homeland. Lorde recognizes Linda's influence in her earliest memories:

> My mother had a special and secret relationship with words, taken for granted as language because it was always there. I did not speak until I was four. When I was three, the dazzling world of strange lights and fascinating shapes I inhabited resolved itself in mundane definitions, and I learned another nature of things through eyeglasses. This perception of things was less colorful and confusing but much more comfortable than the one native to my nearsighted and unevenly focused eyes (*Zami* 31).

In this section titled "How I Became a Poet," which breaks from the otherwise numbered chapters, Lorde distinguishes Linda's "special and secret relationship with words" from "language" itself (*Zami* 31). Linda's "special and secret relationship" informs Lorde's own

relationship with writing and her identity: "I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry as well as of her hidden angers" (*Zami* 32). Because of her mother's storytelling and strong affiliation with Carriacou and Grenada as home, Lorde reflects, "Once *home* was a far way off, a place I had never been but knew well out of my mother's mouth" (*Zami* 13). Li considers this quote, writing, "By conjuring her absent homeland through words, Linda demonstrates to her daughter that home is a construction of language" and therefore "Lorde must fashion a sense of home that emanates not from a specific place but from her 'mother's mouth,' that is, a uniquely maternal generative force" (Li 146-147). Li strikes a vein of tension in life-writing about mothers and their children—that the maternal is not just a source of reproduction, but of creative production[3]. Linda's generative force is her language, through which she creates an unstable, imaginary world for Lorde, untethered from the reality of their lives in Harlem.

Because of her legal-blindness, Lorde was likely reliant on Linda's guidance in the public world and more receptive to her language and mythologies. Further, Lorde either could not, or chose not, to speak as a young child. Li argues that "Lorde's discussion of her mother's puzzling language is coupled with a description of the world she saw before receiving glasses" because Lorde "parallels her distorted vision with the strange images invoked by her mother" (Li 147). Lorde suggests that her near-blindness and late entry into speech may have been related:

> Despite my nearsightedness, or maybe because of it, I learned to read at the same time I learned to talk, which was only about a year or so before I started school. Perhaps *learn* isn't the right word to use for my beginning to talk, because to this day I don't know if I didn't talk because I didn't know how, or if I didn't want to talk because I had nothing to

[3] Moraga, for example, questions the relationship between her pregnancy and fluctuations in creativity. After giving birth to her son, she reflects that her writing and artistic processes have changed. Despite her allusions to embodied writing, Moraga argues for separating the creative faculties of the mind and body.

> say that I would be allowed to say without punishment. Self-preservation starts early in West Indian families (*Zami* 21-22).

Lorde mythologizes her own entry into lived experience through sight and speech and begins a pattern of silence as survival through emotional turmoil, understanding that her speech will always be fraught and at risk of bringing punishment. Soon after receiving glasses, Lorde throws a tantrum in a library. A librarian interrupts and offers to read Lorde a picture book. Fascinated by the letters and images, which she can now make out with the aid of her glasses, Lorde verbally declares that she wants to learn how to read. Linda scoops her up in a rare display of affection. This small scene mythologizes Lorde's ability to read and speak as a late-blooming gift, abilities that transform Lorde's life from a series of uncomfortable and fearful tantrums to an ordered world of relationships hinging on language and storytelling. Speaking, reading, and writing become radical acts of self-expression and independence.

Even as a young child, Lorde feels connected to a broader sense of the universe, and her body—in this case her vision—is responsible for accessing that connection. Lorde adopts the glasses as a removable extension of her body: "I was endlessly curious about these magical circles of glass that were rapidly becoming a part of me, transforming my universe, and remaining movable" (*Zami* 30). Lorde connects this visual experience with the magical or metaphysical, that the glasses are "magic circles" that "transform [her] universe." Her childhood perceptions mirror her adult practices: Lorde uses this visual experience as raw material for understanding *her* universe in particular, just as an autotheoretical practice takes lived experience as raw material for thinking through theory. Li argues, "Both [Lorde's] attempt to grasp the visible world and her struggle to comprehend her mother's language suggest that reality is subjectively perceived and composed of multiple layers of images and impressions. The visual

world and her mother's language are both unstable signifiers" (Li 147). Lorde's experiences suggest that both language and images are slippery and volatile, and her confusions show how susceptible children are to the signifiers of storytelling. Clear vision begins to drive a wedge between Lorde and her mother as Lorde discovers the freedom of reading and speaking in language. I'd like to push Li's understanding of Lorde's childhood perceptions further and argue that Lorde actually grows up in a mythological world created by her mother, and that part of her journey into young adulthood is undoing this mythology.

Lorde as Mythographer

Lorde's self-theorizing begins on the level of language and naming. The 'new spelling' of Lorde's name as Zami from the book's title is not the only time that Lorde rewrites her name. When Linda teaches Lorde to write, Lorde chose to write "Audre" instead of "Audrey" because she "did not like the tail of the Y hanging down below the line in Audrey, and would always forget to put it on, which used to disturb [her] mother greatly," (*Zami* 24). She rewrites her own name to please herself, preferring the "evenness of AUDRELORDE at four years of age" (*Zami* 24). Lorde claims agency by identifying with a new, slightly altered name, "empt[ying] language, even letters, of previous signifiers as she plays with these received symbols. Lorde makes use of all that is available to her, just as African-American experience incorporates the joy of transported and reassembled culture as it remembers the ugly rupture of the Middle Passage" (Alexander 703). Lorde's practices of deconstructing language and meaning begin with her early sense of identity as separate from her mother's expectations. Her multiple renamings speak to a multiplicities of identity: the Lorde that is under her mother's control, and the Lorde that spells her name as Audre. At this early age however, the tension between Lorde and Linda seems to act

more as a split-self than as the robust abundance of selves that many second-wave feminist life-writings work toward, as Lorde learns to include the Y in her name at Linda's insistence: "that was the way it had to be because that was the way it was. No deviation was allowed from [Linda's] interpretations of correct" (*Zami* 24). Lorde claims two identities through two spellings of her name, reclaiming some agency while also relinquishing some individuality to her mother.

It is also through language that Lorde inherits racial and class trauma that moves intergenerationally, particularly through speech: "My mother's words teaching me all manner of wily and diversionary defenses learned from the white man's tongue, from out of the mouth of her father. She had had to use these defenses, and had survived by them, and had also died by them a little, at the same time" (*Zami* 58). Linda's visual racial ambiguity is further complicated by survival tactics taught by her white father, while the emphasis on the linguistic complicates how Linda and Lorde relate to one another in language, and therefore socially, through myth. Linda can pass as white, but Lorde cannot. Lorde adopts silence as a defense mechanism in addition to the "wily and diversionary defenses" she learns from her mother writing, "As a child the most horrible condition I could contemplate was being wrong and being discovered. Mistakes could mean exposure, maybe even annihilation. In my mother's house, there was no room in which to make errors, no room to be wrong" (*Zami* 58). As a woman who cannot pass as white, Lorde cannot easily use the defenses that are acceptable for white individuals. Vulnerability must be avoided at all costs: to do so, Lorde developed a defense mechanism of absolute silence in the face of potential vulnerability, as vulnerability could mean annihilation.

Lorde's vulnerability is tested after the suicide of her best friend, Gennie, somewhere around the age of fifteen. Several months after a first suicide attempt, Gennie arrives at Lorde's childhood home panicked and disheveled, needing a place to stay. Despite Gennie's alarming

state, Lorde's parents remain silent and later scold Lorde for having a friend over so late in the evening. Gennie takes arsenic and dies soon after this encounter. Lorde lies about Gennie to her mother, telling Linda that Gennie's suicide was an accident: even in Lorde's most vulnerable moments, she already feels the need to hide her vulnerability from her mother. When Linda learns the truth, she tells Lorde—without comfort or compassion—to be careful about who she chooses as friends, and that something about Gennie's family was suspicious. Lorde writes, "The merciless quality of my mother's fumbling insights turned her attempt at comfort into another assault. As if her harshness could confer invulnerability upon me. As if in the flames of truth she saw it, I could eventually be forged into some pain-resistant replica of herself" (*Zami* 101). Lorde not only sees her mother as trying to instill values, but to replicate herself and the mythology of strength and security she has created. Lorde decides—although, chronologically in the text, this decision is not revealed until forty pages later—that after the pain of Gennie's death she will never love again:

> *Gennie had been the first person in my life I was conscious of loving. And she had died. Loving hurt too much. My mother had turned into a demon intent on destroying me. You loved people and you came to depend on their being there. But people died or changed or went away and it hurt too much. The only way to avoid pain was not to love anyone, and not to let anyone get too close or too important. The secret to not being hurt like this again, I decided, was never depending on anyone, never needing, never loving.*
>
> It is the last of the dream of children, to be forever untouched. (*Zami* 141)

Linda's mythologies effectively teach Lorde to build an invulnerable, impermeable self, forged like metal. However, vulnerability as a state of openness allows the negative, the positive, and the ambivalent: as Lorde ages, this forged invulnerability complicates her identity, relationships,

and ability to survive. In order to theorize, Lorde must deconstruct the myths surrounding her childhood and find a functional sense of vulnerability.

Returning Myth to the Body

In her writing, Lorde exposes her vulnerability and invulnerability through the body. She returns social myths to the physicality of the body as she experiences racism amongst friends and feminists, damages her body working with radioactive crystals, and struggles to find steady work or her next meal. Lorde survives early adulthood using her mother's mythologies and practices, but those practices further hurt and isolate her. Lorde's writings on her abortion as a young adult show how she returns mythology to the body, and how her mother's mythmaking destabilizes her subjectivity.

In *Zami,* abortion is not just about the life and death of a fetus, but also the life, danger, and death of the mother. Shortly after Gennie's death, "[t]he *Amsterdam News* story about her death announced that she was not pregnant and so no reason for her suicide could be established. Nothing else" (*Zami* 103). Even for a girl as young as Gennie, the myths of womanhood are inseparable from maternal potential. Pregnancy is cast as shameful and perilous enough to spur a young woman to suicide, and Lorde reflects on the public (but whispered) mythology of abortion that she gathered through friends and her work in hospitals:

> I was terrified by the stories I had heard in school and from my friends about the butchers and the abortion mills of the Daily News. Cheap kitchen table abortions. Jean's friend Francie had died on the way to the hospital just last year after trying to do it with the handle of a number 1 paintbrush.

> These horrors were not just stories, nor infrequent. I had seen too many of the results of botched abortions on the bloody gurneys lining the hallways outside the emergency room. (*Zami* 107)

The peril for Lorde, or any woman, in not being able to access a safe abortion is real and visceral. This moment shows the tension between mythology and experience, where the stories told among friends become more than stories: they move from mythological objects to individual subjects whose bodies and lives are in peril.

Lorde finds a woman who can perform an abortion by inserting an inexpensive catheter into the uterus. Through her silence—both her physical silence about the pain and metaphorical silence of the abortion experience—Lorde is able to escape the risks and social mythologies of pregnancy, so long as she survives the abortion. Lorde does not shy away from visceral descriptions, allowing the reader to feel the pain and fear alongside her: "When passed through the cervix into the uterus while soft, it coiled, all fifteen inches, neatly into the womb. Once hardened, its angular turns ruptured the bloody lining and began the uterine contractions that eventually expelled the implanted fetus, along with the membrane. If it wasn't expelled too soon. If it did not also puncture the uterus" (*Zami* 109). Lorde writes that she lies "mute, [her] teeth clenched against the pain" as she reverts to her childhood silences in the face of emotional and physical pain (*Zami* 109). Her refusal to speak is part of her self-preservation. Despite leaving her mother's house, or rather because of it, Lorde uses the silence that she learned in her mother's presence:

> I couldn't begin to think about the risks I was running. But another piece of me was being amazed at my own daring. I had done it. Even more than leaving my home, this action which was tearing my guts apart and from which I could die except I wasn't going to—

> this action was a kind of shift from safety towards self-preservation. It was a choice of pains. That's what living was all about. I clung to that and tried to only feel proud. (*Zami* 111)

Lorde chooses one sort of safety over another, her independence over her physical safety. Even though Lorde chooses to end this pregnancy, her brief experience with maternity shows the structural vulnerability of the body to pregnancy, and to life and death. When Lorde's friend Blossom visits that evening to check in, Lorde reflects, "We only talked about inconsequential things. Never a word about what was going on inside me. Now it was my secret; the only way I could handle it was alone" (*Zami* 111). Even in Blossom's knowing, silence and secrecy pervade: speaking it into language would mean engaging with vulnerability.

And yet, around 30 years later, Lorde explores the bloody and emotional details of this experience. Lorde uses the specific pain of her body to return the mythologies of pregnancy and abortion to the individual. Alexander argues that, for Lorde, "[t]he intellect lives and operates in the body. The heart and soul express themselves in the body. The body manifests the ills of an oppressive world that is especially punishing to women and poor people and people of color. The body is a very specific site in Lorde's work, the location where all this takes place" (Alexander 710-711). Lorde's pregnancy and abortion are moments where the "body manifests the ills of an oppressive world," especially when access to abortion is charged with classist, sexist, and racist discourse and action. The physical pain of her body becomes an (in)expression of her mental and emotional anguish. Put more simply, "[b]odies express what verbal language cannot," and Lorde refuses to voice her pain surrounding her abortion (Alexander 710-711). Bodies express what mythology or theory cannot: individualized, embodied experience.

Lorde comes to realize that physical and emotional pain are not interchangeable, and the healing of the body cannot guarantee a healing of the mind, yet she maintains a mythological persona of strength and independence. Two weeks after the abortion, Lorde writes, "Since I was physically fine and healthy, it didn't occur to me that I wasn't totally free from any aftermath of that grueling affair" and she becomes depressed and despondent: "I came home from school and my part-time job, to sometimes sit on the edge of my boxspring bed in the center of the room, still with my coat on, and would suddenly realize that it was the next morning, and I had not taken off my coat yet, much less put away the container of milk I had bought for the cat I found to join me in my misery" (*Zami* 116). Much like Linda, who formed a mythology around her own power, Lorde clings to a persona of strength, independence, and dependability for the young women she surrounds herself with: "The abortion had left me with an additional sadness about which I could not speak, certainly not to these girls who saw my house and my independence as refuge, and seemed to think that I was settled and strong and dependable, which, of course, was exactly what I wanted them to think" (*Zami* 119). Lorde relies on a mythology of her individual strength and toughness to survive, but this toughness or impenetrability does not have a firm basis. Although Lorde is a strong woman, her feelings of hurt and pain do not match the outward mythical perceptions, and the discrepancy causes discomfort and danger, just as her mother's false mythologies did.

Lorde takes on a mothering role for many of the women in her life at this time, but can only communicate with them so long as her instilled invulnerability is intact. Misunderstood racial tensions and Lorde's mythological personas create problematic gaps in her relationships: "When I found out that I had failed german and trig in the summer that year, it never occurred to me to think that it was because I had spent the summer wetnursing the girls of The Branded in

my tiny tenement apartment" (*Zami* 118). The invocation of "wetnursing" not only suggests a maternal relation to these young women, but a position of nurturing other women's children to her own detriment. The racial connotations of the word also emphasize Lorde's comments throughout *Zami* on her friendships with white women, and their ignorance as to how race complicates her life. Rather than ignore racial significations, in this moment Lorde leans into a charged mythology of Black mothers as wetnurses, a signification that her own mother would have avoided, ignored, or rewrote. Lorde still refuses to speak of that which might make her appear vulnerable, but this presents a turning moment in the narrative as Lorde acknowledges the ways in which race complicate her positionality as a maternal figure. Lorde begins to rewrite her identity by reclaiming her body, and slowly accepting experiences of vulnerability.

Towards the end of her biomythography, Lorde opens up theoretical conversations about her vision for women-aligned relationships through "Zami," a Carriacou word for how women work together as both friends and lovers. She uses the raw material of her experiences with other women to consider practical approaches that hinder and help her romantic and platonic relationships, and then opens her epilogue to theoretical speech and mythic storytelling. Lorde mythologizes her emotional and physical relationships with women into larger exchanges of power and love that connect them with their own maternal histories and a wider community of women.

When Lorde and Muriel open up their relationship to Lynn, they not only test their commitment but also their ability to achieve the kind of relationship Zami offers. Lorde desires both Muriel and Lynn, but fears ruining her relationship with Muriel: "since my wants felt contradictory, I had to figure out some way I could have everything I wanted and still be safe. That was very difficult, because we were in uncharted territory" (*Zami* 212). Lorde recognizes

that opening their relationship encompasses a practical experiment in Zami, writing, "What we were trying to build was dangerous, and could have enormous consequences for Muriel and me. But our love was strong enough to be tested, strong enough to provide a base for loving and extended relationships. I always used to say that I believed in sleeping with my friends. Well, here was a chance to put that theory into practice" (*Zami* 212). The vulnerability needed to "put into practice the kind of sisterhood that we talked and dreamed about for the future" feels dangerous and destabilizing (*Zami* 211). Lorde is still operating under a mode of reservation and self-preservation that is not compatible with Zami and her visions of sisterhood. Lorde fears the sort of identity-dissolving love that encompassed her young, passionate friendship with Gennie, struggling to figure out how she can both act on her desires and maintain the integrity of her mythic personas. For both Lorde and Muriel, love centers on control, stability, and invulnerability, and this approach is the downfall of their relationship: "Muriel talked about love as a voluntary commitment, while we each struggled through the steps of an old dance, not consciously learned, but desperately followed. We had learned well in the kitchens of our mothers, both powerful women who did not let go easily. In those warm places of survival, love was another name for control" (*Zami* 214). Their theoretical visions fail because of the intergenerational trauma and survival skills the women have absorbed: neither has learned how to allow the vulnerability needed to practice the theories of multifaceted, women-centered relationships they envision.

The slow death of Lorde's and Muriel's relationship comes to a dramatic climax when Muriel secretly sleeps with Lorde's ex-lover Jill. Hearing them in the next room, Lorde writes, "A veil of red fury settled over my consciousness which I had not felt since those days in my mother's house when I used to burst into nosebleeds instead of tears. I bit down on a mouthful of

woolen blanket, feeling like I had to commit murder, only there was no one to kill. I fell asleep again immediately in desperate self-protection" (*Zami* 232). The emotional pain rockets Lorde back to the oppressive atmosphere of her mother's home, where refusing verbal expression caused spontaneous physical ailments, like nosebleeds.

In the morning, Lorde's anger continues to manifest through her body on her commute: "I rode up to Morris Avenue, my eyes filmed in red, my hands shaking. I could not separate the pain of betrayal from the pain of raw fury… If I could not let this poison out of me I would die. A blinding headache came and went… My nose started to bleed around Grand Central Station" (*Zami* 232). Lorde's emotions are closely entwined with her physical sensations. Distracted at work that day, Lorde severely burns her hand:

> I watched as the pot slowly rose from the edge of the sink, and the boiling water poured over the lip of the pot in slow motion onto my left hand as it rested upon the teapot. The water cascaded down, bounced off the back of hand and flowed down the drain. I watched the brown skin cloud with steam, then turn red and shiny, and the poison began to run out of me like water as I fumbled at the bottom of my shirt cuff and peeled back the wet cloth from my scalded wrist. The steamed flesh had already started to blister.
>
> Walking into the staff room next door where the rest of my colleagues sat discussing book orders. 'I've burnt myself by mistake.' Then pain erupting into the space left by the draining away of the poison. (*Zami* 233)

It is through her "red and shiny" wound that the emotional "poison began to run out of her like water" (*Zami* 233). Lorde seems to disassociate, detaching herself as though she's watching boiling water run over someone else's skin. Only in encountering her pain in speech—"I've burnt myself by mistake"—does the disassociation drop away and her pain become real. Only

then is Lorde able to take ownership over the pain, as the physical pain enters the space that had been crowded with emotional pain. Lorde writes, “During the next few days, when I felt anything other than pain, it was guilt and embarrassment, as if I’d done an unforgivable and unmentionable act. Self-mutilation” (*Zami* 233). Lorde admits that the injury was not purely an accident but self-mutilation, as if she knew that physical pain might relieve her mental anguish.

Lorde and Muriel “never spoke of Jill nor of the accident” and Lorde reflects that their silence is the final downfall of their relationship: “Now, most of all, when we needed the words between us, Muriel and I were both silent. What was lying between us had moved beyond our old speech, and we were both too lost and too frightened to attempt a new language” (*Zami* 233-234). Both women feel unwilling or unable to give up the invulnerability taught by their mothers, remaining solidly within the social and linguistic mythologies. Zami is impossible without a functional language that aligns with their emotional and physical connection. Lorde worries that if Zami failed with Muriel, it could never be achieved: “For if knowing what we knew, and sharing all that we shared, Muriel and I could not make it together, then what two women on earth could? For that matter, what two people on earth could possibly make it together?” (*Zami* 236).

Rewriting Identity

The freedom of biomythography allows Lorde to construct the narrative of her renaming in mythic proportions, forming a climatic, transformational scene where Lorde reaches a breakthrough. Lorde boards a bus and finds a sudden music swelling in her head “as if a choir of angels had boarded the Second Avenue bus directly in front of me. They were singing the last chorus of an old spiritual of hope...the music was like a surge of strength. It felt rich with hope

and a promise of life—more importantly, a new way through or beyond pain" (*Zami* 238-239). Lorde realizes that the "promise of life" requires openness, and openness means accepting vulnerability, in order to achieve her theoretical visions of the future. Lorde mythologizes the way that her new name Zami comes to her, writing, "The physical realities of the dingy bus slid away from me. I suddenly stood upon a hill in the center of an unknown country, hearing the sky fill with a new spelling of my own name" (*Zami* 239). The experience harkens back to the idea of an "unknown" land like Carriacou, a home that she never experienced but learned from her mother's mouth, an untethered reality. Her name Zami—women who work together as friends and lovers—comes from the sky. Lorde's name is mythically rewritten, just as Lorde rewrote the spelling of her own name as a child. This scene weaves biography through identity, fictionalization through exaggeration, and myth through Lorde's authorial voice. Her mythology is not simply revisionist, but original and reparative.

Only after this transformational scene does Lorde meet Afrekete, or Kitty, that Lorde experiences a relationship where Zami is possible. From the beginning their relationship is deeply rooted in both the physical and seemingly metaphysical: "Her great lidded luminescent eyes looked directly and startlingly into mine. It was as if she had suddenly become another person, as if the wall of glass formed by my spectacles, and behind which I had become so used to hiding, had suddenly dissolved" (*Zami* 247). Just as her eyeglasses changed her perception of the world as a child, Lorde's connection with Afrekete "suddenly dissolved" the mythological personas Lorde had built. This foreshadows what she finds with Afrekete: a new vision, a new paradigm. She writes, "Afrekete taught me roots, new definitions of our women's bodies—definitions for which I had only been in training to learn before" (*Zami* 250). Lorde had learned rigid understandings of love and sexuality through her mother's mythologies and younger,

fumbling relationships with other women, but it is with Afrekete that she can move beyond the simple ignorance and destructive rewriting that Linda performed and into critical and theoretical discussions on the functions of love, oppression, and social mythology in their lives as queer Black women.

The ideals Lorde and Afrekete envision for women's relationships require both a vulnerability and an invulnerability. They not only address the scripts and mythologies that affect their lives, but bond over "how [their] psychic landscapes had been plundered and wearied by those repeated battles and campaigns" as Black women in a white, heteronormative world (*Zami* 250). Afrekete helps Lorde recognize how to balance vulnerability: "we held each other and laughed and cried about what we had paid for that toughness, and how hard it was to explain to anyone who didn't already know it that soft and tough had to be one and the same for either to work at all, like our joy and the tears mingling on the one pillow beneath our heads" (*Zami* 250). When Afrekete leaves without notice to return to her own daughter and mother, Lorde is not devastated or broken like she had been with Gennie or Muriel. Afrekete's "print remains on [Lorde's] life with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo" entwining lived experience into the body (*Zami* 253). Rather than the rigid, transactional love with Muriel, Lorde and Afrekete exchanged energy and "parted, passed, reformed, and reshaped" through their relationship. Lorde's language implies a physicality to their transformations, suggesting an equal emphasis on physical, mental, and spiritual experience. On leaving her first real apartment, which she uses to mark the ending of the text, Lorde writes:

> The casing of this place had been my home for seven years, the amount of time it takes for the human body to completely renew itself, cell by living cell. And in those years my life had become increasingly a bridge and field of women. *Zami.*

> *Zami. A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers.*
>
> (*Zami* 255)

Lorde considers how her body turned itself over into a new, renewed body in the latest years of the text, implying a simultaneous working and healing of physical and psychic wounds. In seven years, she moved from an invulnerable, static way of (non)loving to a multifaceted experience of love that requires vulnerability, change, and openness. Her autotheory is necessarily communal and relational.

Lorde's relationship with Afrekete is, narratively, short—taking up just the last ten pages of a 250-page text—but the effects on Lorde are profound. In the epilogue, she reiterates Afrekete's importance and lays out a theory of what she envisions for women's relationships: "Every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me—so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognize her. And in that growing, we came to separation, that place where work begins. Another meeting" (*Zami* 255). Lorde's understanding of identity moves from static and private to relational, finding "invaluable piece[s]" of herself in openness to others.

Zami is not just emotional and physical relationships between women, but women who *work* together, an active verb that indicates active change. Just as the "work begins" where separation occurs, Zami is only possible where women actively work towards loving relationships. Keating writes:

> It is extremely significant that Audre's 'new naming' directly precedes her encounter with Kitty/Afrekete, Lorde's personalized version of a West African linguist/trickster figure. Indeed, Lorde's use of revisionist myth to respell her 'own name' indicates a provocative inscription onto the void Spillers reads in the 'American Grammar Book.'

> Lorde's self-inscription occurs in the ambivalent space opened by the interplay between language and silence, between 'blackness' and 'whiteness.' (Keating 163)

Keating reads Lorde's respelling to Zami as an action that occurs in the in-between spaces where vulnerability resides, emphasizing how Lorde uses the foundational tool of language to rewrite and reclaim agency. As a child, Lorde claims (a hidden) agency over her mother by privately misspelling her name from Audrey to Audre. As an adult, Lorde again claims agency over the pain in her life with a more complete renaming: Zami. If autotheory is about using the body and experience to theorize through language, then this self-definition distills the autotheoretical impulse into one moment, one word.

Mythology is a way of tethering history and lived experience into language. It both refines and extrapolates the relationship between living the story and storytelling in mythology and mythography. Mythologizing—using language to create second-order symbolic systems—can be a method of theorizing through personal experience, particularly experience that, like for Lorde, is rooted in recent histories of her mother and distance histories of Carriacou. Lorde writes, "*When the strongest word for what I have to offer come out of me sounding like words from my mother's mouth, then I have to reassess the meaning of everything I have to say now, or re-examine the worth of her words*" (*Zami* 31). Lorde discovered home through her mother's mouth—a source of secret poetry, but also a source of suppression, erasure, and manipulation. It is only when Carriacou is no longer home, when she moves out of her mother's house and unlearns the defenses Linda taught, that she can discover a new sort of home: Zami, relationships between women. Lorde is intimately connected, both to her mother and to other women, through both body and language. Only through realizations of mythic proportions and miniscule offerings of vulnerability does Lorde come to learn paradigms where achieving Zami is possible. *Zami* is

not a parable or mythology with a single moral lesson: the breadth of discussion on the text alone shows its potential for expansive aims in theories of difference, erotics, and biomythography. Her life experiences, or at the very least mythologized life experience, offer raw material for theorizing Zami into being and hinges on an openness to vulnerability. Mythology is capable of forging a false sense of invulnerability by disguising, hiding, or even erasing vulnerability: autotheory becomes an exercise in deconstruction, rebuilding, and reclamation.

Chapter 2: Writing the "Living Woman Wound" in Cherríe Moraga's *Waiting in the Wings*

Cherríe Moraga understands the productive faculties of language and the body as deeply entwined: "*These journal entries are my meager attempts to keep the pen flowing, to discover the next step en la jornada… I feel empty of stories, empty of ideas, words, images, impulses... I shape these letters onto the page as tiny steps in a dance circling circling circling until I arrive at the heartbeat, a pulse, a place from which the writing stirs new life*" (Waiting 47). Moraga revisits journal entries like this one in *Waiting in the Wings* to open a conversation with her past self, combining the italicized entries with new meditations and reflections on the pain, joy and vulnerability of her pregnancy and early motherhood. In reaching into the past, Moraga theorizes on her changing sense of self and processes of writing.

In a note preceding the text, Moraga acknowledges that this is her "own personal 'fiction'" and that she has "at times reconfigured the events depicted in *Waiting in the Wings* in favor of the requirements of dramatic storytelling" (Waiting 9). Moraga explains that she "was very conscious of figuring out a way to tell the truth expected of autobiography and still fictionalize to make it more real. I was very tied to the idea of writing a rather sentimental narrative that followed the thread of the child's development" ("Cherríe Moraga" 172). Her disclosure of alteration and dramatization complicates the autotheoretical impulse in the text. Moraga is often one of the first writers mentioned in autotheory studies, and several critics have described Moraga's work with language similar to current critical work on autotheory before the term came into popular use. Benigno Trigo writes that "Moraga engages in a paradoxical politics of remembering what cannot be remembered in what I would call instead an experiential mode of writing" emphasizing the role of lived experience (Trigo 110). Lisa Tatonetti writes that "Moraga gives flesh and blood... pasting journal entries and fictional narrative into an account

that not only theorizes but actualizes… queer family" through narratives that "function as both story and theoretical testing grounds, investigating the ways in which culture is perceived and performed" (Tatonetti 229-240). Trigo and Tatonetti address both Moraga's larger body of work and *Waiting in the Wings* in their studies of accident and vulnerability, respectively. Moraga's writing is a method of prying open vulnerabilities to reflect, interrogate, and theorize. By dramatizing her vulnerability, Moraga centers the autotheoretical impulse as a curated conversation with the self.

Interrogations into Identity

Moraga comes to motherhood relatively late in life at forty years old, and her writing reveals the openness required by this mid-life shift in identity: "When I came out as a lesbian at the age of twenty-two, I simply assumed that I would never be married to a man, I would never have children" but "[t]hen at the age of thirty, it hit me: I was a woman, and therefore *capable* of having children" (Waiting 19-20). Her conception of motherhood looks both internally and externally, assuming that motherhood is a function of womanhood that can only be executed in relation to men. In her essay "Still Waiting in the (Still) War Years," Moraga reflects on her longer relationship with gender: "I remember that as a young person my palpable hunger to be sexual with a woman made me desperately want to have a penis, all the while denying that forbidden want… Did I feel I was a boy trapped in a girl's body? Absolutely—at five years old and every day for nearly fifteen years thereafter" ("Still Loving" 185). Moraga's journey into motherhood must be foregrounded by her understanding gender and sexuality, as her shifting relationship with identity affects how she understands both womanhood and motherhood.

When the institution of motherhood is, as Adrienne Rich explains, aligned with heterosexuality and femininity, Moraga's butch lesbian identity prevents her from considering motherhood. R. Joyce Z. L. Garay argues that Moraga's inability to imagine herself as a mother "exemplifies both the heteronormative thinking that equates womanhood with maternal subjectivity, as well as the notion that queer sexuality, especially butch sexuality, is somehow exclusive of maternity" (Garay 199). Moraga explains the ways in which she felt this exclusivity and resistance towards motherhood:

> "This may sound strange, a statement of the blatantly obvious, but buried deep inside me, regardless of the empirical evidence to the contrary, I had maintained the rigid conviction that lesbians (that is, those of us on the more masculine side of the spectrum) weren't really women. We were women-lovers, a kind of third sex, and most definitely not men. Having babies was something "real" women did—not butches, not girls who knew they were queer since grade school." (Waiting 20)

Written in the reflective voice in the prologue, Moraga's voice gives the reader a glimpse at her longer sense of identity, "buried deep inside," that her butchness was incompatible with femininity and motherhood. Even Moraga's word choices of "rigid conviction," "empirical evidence," and "masculine," suggests that Moraga assumed a subjectivity that excluded malleability, permeability, and/or vulnerability, traits that often appear innate to motherhood, or even womanhood. As Suzanne Bost explains, "If women are assumed to be constitutionally permeable and dependent, then they are 'naturally' suited for motherhood. But butch dykes, who are supposed to possess the hard, stoic qualities of the self-reliant, are not supposed to be 'mother material'" (Bost 171). While stoicism or independence are not inherently negative attributes, Tatonetti argues that in refusing openness, Moraga's identification "as something 'other' than

woman…is culturally coded as loss" and her sense of womanhood is then "fundamentally lacking" rather than "liberative" (Tatonetti 24). When womanhood is synonymous with motherhood, being something "other" than woman is not only seen as a loss or a lack, but a subject position that exists outside of motherhood. Moraga's butch identity does not allow for the vulnerability, permeability, or openness required of motherhood. Without vulnerability, motherhood remains an impossibility: a lack.

Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa both theorize on their experiences of queerness in relation to Chicana/o culture. Anzaldúa describes the mythical *mita' y mita'* or half and half, a local figure who lives half the year as a woman and half the year as a man. *Mita' y mita'* is "neither one or the other but a strange doubling" whose ability to be both male and female Anzaldúa finds compelling: "half and halfs are not suffering from a confusion of sexual identity, or even from a confusion of gender. What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other" (Anzaldúa 41). By using "we" Anzaldúa claims half and half as part of her own identity, her own queerness, and perhaps for other queer people as well. She suggests, as does Moraga, that our contemporary culture is not open to duality or multiplicity in identity. Moraga is similarly attracted to "the Native concept of 'two-spirit'" as "[i]t was as evident then, as it is now, that there are some of us born this way, possessing pronounced male and female attributes, and that this possession is not a curse, but a blessing with its own integral power, which requires respect from our community" ("Still Loving" 187). Moraga wrote of this "blessing" and "power" in 2009, more than ten years after the publication of *Waiting in the Wings* and more than sixteen years after she conceived Rafael. Moraga suggests that "bodies walking outside the borders of their 'born-gender'" and bodies that "carry the memory of womanhood" could "serve as queer models of resistance" highlighting the connection between

knowledge and the body in autotheoretical writing ("Still Living" 186). Moraga sees her body and sexuality as a site of resistance against patriarchy and heteronormativity, which motherhood as an institution sustains.

Moraga sees her positionality in a third identity, "a kind of third sex": "We were the *defenders* of women and children, children we could never fully call our own" (Waiting 20). Despite loving and raising children, Moraga's sense of identity prevents her from inhabiting the maternal subject position. Instead, she adopts a more stoic yet transient "defender" positionality. Taking on a defensive protector role, Moraga only considers the vulnerability of others, rather than herself.

The rift between Moraga's queer identity and maternal subjectivity is deepened by how she sees her "defender" position as protecting femme women and their children from patriarchal power. Rich describes motherhood as an institution that "aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (Rich 13). As someone who has no interest in being under male control, and even vehemently resists it, Moraga does not feel she can participate in the institution of motherhood so long as it continues to serve patriarchal interests. Moraga's anxieties about contributing to patriarchal power run deep enough to influence how she understands gender identity: "Womanhood matters. I do not want to keep losing my macha daughters to manhood through any cultural mandates that are not derived of our own making. I do not want butch lesbians to become a dying breed, headed for extinction" ("Still Living" 186). She continues, "it is vitally necessary to view one's *personal* suffering within a *political* context in order to understand the design behind oppression," implying that individual questioning of gender identity needs to be understood in context of a patriarchy that oppresses women and people of color, and that women who transition "*collaborate with our oppressor*" of patriarchy

or the gender binary ("Still Living"186). This is a potential problem, or even violence, of autotheoretical writing. For a writer of Moraga's influence in particular, writing is spurred by personal experience and personal expression but is also inherently *political*. Writing that self-wounds can be a painful and productive, even healing, personal exercise: but writing that is *inherently political* (although one could argue that all published writing is) can do more wounding than just to the self.

In *Waiting in the Wings,* Moraga seeks to understand how her body can continue to be a site of resistance even while participating in the institution of motherhood. Part of her resistance comes in the act of writing: by sharing her vulnerability and her (mis)understandings of motherhood, she begins to envision new apertures for how to enable multiplicities of identity.

Defending Living Wounds

From her defender position Moraga tangentially parents children with her lesbian lovers: "My search for this familia has played out (sometimes with a vengeance) with every lover I have had, regardless of age or race or cultural background. With each one, I thought myself committed 'for the duration,' for surely we were at war, trying to make a place for lesbian love in a woman hating world" (Waiting 19). Moraga adopts the defender position because she sees no alternative in a culture hostile towards lesbians and queer individuals. She explores how stepparenting or "nonbiological" parenting can be a structurally vulnerable position in individual families and in society at large because stepparents often lack legal protections or a "blood" connection to the children they raise, parent, defend, or are otherwise connected to. Stepparenting leaves Moraga open to wounding because of its legal and social precariousness. She even refers to this "defender" subjectivity as a "fantasy" she has "lived out," suggesting that she knew this position

to be vulnerable and potentially untenable (Waiting 20). Moraga recounts her relationship with Joel, a child who she cares for during a three-year relationship that painfully dissolves. After seeing Joel for the last time, Moraga reflects, "I cursed my car and raged against my predicament, my lack of bona fide motherhood or fatherhood, and the absolute impotence of being the lesbian lover of a mother. *Men (and women) come and go*, I could hear my mother's refrain. *All you really got are your children*" (Waiting 21). Enraged and disheartened by the continued vulnerability of her position as neither mother nor father, only lover, Moraga is troubled by the structure of the nuclear family. Not only does she lament her inability to access motherhood or fatherhood (or anywhere stable in between), she is haunted by the specters of children she has lost.

It is through mothering Joel that Moraga comes to realize that she already experiences the vulnerability required in motherhood: "the mother [Joel] called forth in me made my hunger for Rafael Angel all the more urgent: a child that would never be taken from me, a child to raise from scratch" (Waiting 22). Moraga's yearning for a child of her own, and to take her place within the experience and institution of motherhood, is both spurred on and complicated by the structural vulnerabilities she experiences. Moraga wants to reject the vulnerability of co-parenting by having a "*child that would never be taken away*" (Waiting 22). However, the experience of maternity requires a different sort of personal and structural vulnerability, and Moraga comes to discover that even "bona fide motherhood" is still susceptible to destabilization, pain, and loss.

Moraga's identity is complicated under both gender and nation, as her Mexican heritage makes her yearn for close familial contact while her lesbian feminist ideals make her resistant to the patriarchal aspects of her Chicano/a culture. Theorizing on building queer familia, Moraga

writes “I’ve always longed for something else in my relationships—something woman-centered, something cross-generational, something extended, something sensual, something humilde ante la creadora. In short, something Mexican and familial but without all the cultural constraints” (Waiting 18). Moraga feels those cultural constraints on the intersection of her butch and maternal identities: “*When I hear of my brother… asking my sister, ‘Was it artificial insemination, or did she just get together with some guy?’ the harshness in his tone chills me. Is it anger? Fear? What he wants to know is: Who is the father? Where is the man in the picture?*” (Waiting 37). Moraga’s brother illustrates how the institution of motherhood is assumed to serve men, and Moraga’s deep discomfort with the male-centered language surrounding motherhood. To avoid the wounds and vulnerabilities that patriarchal culture has enabled men to inflict, Moraga admits that she has “constructed [her] daily life, to the degree to which [she] am able, outside the prison of patriarchy. This is not a rhetorical statement” (Waiting 108). Her struggle is heightened over her concerns in discovering that Rafael will be a male child. In giving birth to a son and wanting that son to be connected to her blood familia, Moraga renders herself vulnerable to the everyday violences of men, patriarchy, and heteronormativity: “*I prayed that I would learn how to raise a male child well, that the wounds men have inflicted upon me, even in their absence, will not poison me against my son*” (Waiting 4). Moraga, in preparing for Rafael’s birth and how it will shift her subjectivity, must prepare to address these older wounds and receive new ones.

Writing is one way of processing both wounding by the world and self-wounding. Trigo argues, “Maternal writing returns agency to those who suffer the accident of being born Chicana, lesbian, and female” and “returns vulnerability to racialized, heteronormative, and patriarchal society and culture by bearing witness to its accidents” (Trigo 92). Moraga’s practice of

journaling allows for bearing witness to accidents in the moment and recognizing the wounds inflicted. She worries about how the accident of a male son will rearrange her life, and how her son may be vulnerable to both patriarchy and her own rhetoric: "*I must believe that my son can forgive his mother's relentless need to describe the source of our female deformation. It is not mere feminist rhetoric that makes a woman stop dumbfounded in the face of a life of raising a son. It is the living woman-wound that we spend our lives trying to heal"* (Waiting 33). In attempting to protect herself, Moraga risks losing the positive aspects of vulnerability: openness to being affected and/or affecting change. Identity becomes fraught with a sense of closure or denial, rather than openness. In writing of this "*living woman wound*" Moraga can find resistance to the familial and cultural pressures assailing her, but defense can also require a sense of closure and impermeability. The woman-wound takes on a double entendre in *Waiting in the Wings* as both the wounds inflicted by patriarchal culture, and the wounding that occurs because of the vulnerable experience of pregnancy and mothering.

Institutional Terror

In the moments of *Waiting in the Wings* where Moraga has few archival entries but long interjected reflections, the reader can sense experiences that were too raw to process in writing while they were occurring. Many of these instances occur in the treacherous days of Rafael's premature birth, which begins a long and arduous stay in the ICN and a period of incredible stress for Moraga and Ella. Their experience is not only complicated by Rafael's many surgeries and tenuous grasp on life, but also Moraga's tenuous acceptance into the institution of motherhood and the patriarchal, heteronormative medical institution they spend so much time in. While many of the women nurses show Rafael and Moraga tremendous care—"the nurses have

been the real healers"— Moraga's and Ella's subjectivities are questioned and safety threatened by other members of the hospital staff (*Waiting* 79). Tatonetti mentions one "snapshot" when Ella calls to ask for an update on Rafael: "'Who are you?' the receptionist hears no male voice on the line, but a woman my lover, seeking to know about our son. 'Read the damn chart,' Ella snaps back. 'I'm the co-mother.'" (Waiting 63). Tatonetti claims that instances like this one "show how heterosexist definitions of kinship attempt to repress even the possibility of queer family" by refusing to accommodate Moraga's and Ella's relationship, even after months in the same ICN (Tatonetti 240). However, I argue that instances like these are more than repressive: when Moraga's and Ella's relationship threatens the heteronormative standards of the nuclear family, they in turn are threatened by those who, like Moraga's brother, hold stake in maintaining the status quo.

In the hospital setting, Moraga's subject position as a mother supersedes that of butch or lesbian, at least as a lone mother. The lone mother can still be assumed to fit into heteronormative standards and therefore be "tolerated," as Rich describes it: "As Rafael's biological mother, I am surrounded by acceptance at the hospital, until Ella walks in and we are again the lesbian couple, the queer moms-exoticized or ostracized" (Waiting 76). Moraga is accepted into the institution of motherhood as long as her sexuality is not apparent: "The very existence of the queer family must be outed and the butch embraced—or more correctly, erased—in a vain attempt to maintain the illusion of the heteronormative family unit" (Tatonetti 241). Moraga cannot be accepted as butch-mother[4] until the precedent "butch" is erased: only

[4] In his chapter "Coalescence in Evolution: Queer Familia in Cherríe Moraga's *Waiting in the Wings*," Garay considers "distinct facets" Moraga's "maternal subjectivity" through several hyphenated identities: "Chicana-mother/blood-mother, butch-mother, lover-mother, writer-mother" and that she "fights to bring together in radical coalescence." Garay's hyphenated terms are useful in considering how Moraga's identities overlap and influence each other.

then is she permitted into the heteronormative institutions of motherhood and medicine that function on an assumption of heteronormativity. It is Ella, even in her passing-femme performance, who shatters this illusion. In the face of Ella's rejection, Moraga comes to fully express her defender and mother subject positions as she rages against the culture and institutions that prevent her from enacting her full identity.

Moraga and Ella break the hospitals norms of entry and identification, threatening the assumed structures underlying the medical institution, particularly in the maternal ward. The hospital guards stand as a literal reminder of the physical and emotional stakes Moraga and Ella must navigate. Moraga describes continued difficulties with the guards after hours, when only immediate family is allowed into the ICN:

> 'She (referring to Ella) is immediate family. Call the ICN. They'll okay us.' The same old ritual, the same harassment night after night. Then he can't help himself, and a grin begins to crack his professional facade. 'You say you're both moms!' He eyes his buddies, his co-workers, and the street gang begins to form around us. Oh, they're gonna milk this one for all its worth. They are very bored. 'I didn't know two women could have a baby together. (Waiting 75)

The guards terrorize Moraga and Ella as this confrontation is not about a breach of hospital security, but a confrontation between heteronormativity and queer family. Moraga writes, "My impotence enrages me. I can't protect her from the pain she experiences each time they make her the outlaw. I'm the dyke in the matter, I tell myself. I'm the one who's supposed to be outside" (Waiting 76). She worries for Ella who is not accustomed to this outside, abjected position: "I know this is new for Ella. New and hard. As a femme, she's always passed effortlessly," (Waiting 76). Moraga's impotence against structural obstacles renders her as vulnerable but she

concurrently exploits a vulnerability in heteronormative family construction: Moraga "highlights the dominant culture's anxiety regarding the tenuousness of gender identities" (Tatonetti 241). Through her dual performance of butch defender and vulnerable mother, she highlights a vulnerability in the hospital's heteronormative assumptions of family by insisting on a wholly different value system not organized by a heterosexual partnership and blood family, but by the queer familia she constructs through choice. She says, "I am not fooled. They are not fooled. Even motherhood does not make me loyal to them" (Waiting 108). Moraga refuses to bend to the requirements of a patriarchal and heteronormative family structure that threatens to erase her butch-mother subject position. Even the vulnerability she allows in motherhood will not make her loyal to the repressive structures that surround her life. She knows that "they" are not fooled by her motherhood; she does not fit the normative maternal role, and her motherhood will not change her loyalties or the construction of her life.

Life and Death

Moraga chose motherhood, in part, to have "*a child that would never be taken,*" but Rafael's premature birth and intestinal surgeries reveal the impossibility of that statement. Moraga's pregnancy and Rafael's early life show the structural vulnerability of motherhood and family to pain, degeneration, and death. Moraga draws a parallel from Rafael's conception and the news that her friend Tede is sick with AIDS: "*There is meaning in the fact that my fetus has formed itself into a male, a meaning I must excavate from the most buried places in myself, as well as from this city, this era of dying into which my baby will be born"* (Waiting 32). The dominant culture's ignorance and denial of the AIDS crisis foregrounds the vulnerability of bodies and identities under medical institutions: "The hospital was full of AIDS patients, and

Ella and I often wondered about how *their* lovers were treated when they came through the same door after-hours" (Waiting 76). The hospital setting reveals cultural reliance on heteronormative structures and the emotional and physical violences, both obvious and covert, that these structures are sustained by. Moraga's and Rafael's physical vulnerabilities revealed through the openness of the body, but Moraga and Ella are also susceptible to erasure by the institutions that are meant to support families.

Moraga's sense of connection between illness/death and health/life is heightened by a sense of bodily permeability through pregnancy. She is rendered vulnerable by her bodily experiences and her inability to defend against death and illness for Rafael:

> *I remain ever awed by the fragility of the life inside me, or maybe it is only I who am fragile. At each threat to my pregnancy, the baby remains sólido, intacto…*
>
> *I have no control over this vulnerability. I tell Myrtha it is so hard to want something so bad and to feel that this destiny of mother and child is truly out of my hands, truly a gift from the cosmos. I am here to receive it, but I cannot cling to it any more than I can predict the nature of the son I will have. I keep thinking he is his own soul, so much so that at times I forget my own role in shaping him.* (Waiting 40)

Alarmed by continual colds and illnesses of her own throughout her pregnancy, Moraga fears the lack of control she faces towards her own body and towards Rafael. Vulnerability can be a positive experience, but when Moraga discovers her *lack of control* over the vulnerabilities that she and her son face, that vulnerability becomes intolerable. Accustomed to her *defender* position that attempts to control vulnerability, she struggles to cope. In her essay "Vulnerable Subjects," Bost explains that "The hospital disables Moraga as a mother because she cannot care for her baby without the mediation and assistance of medical staff and machines" and that,

because of this, “Moraga repeatedly finds her Chicana feminist values challenged by the Eurocentric, patriarchal medical institution that treats all patients as objects to be ‘repaired’ according to one standard of ‘health’” (Bost 170-171). In the face of impotence against rigid medicinal structures that attempt to erase her queer and Chicana identity through white, Western ideals of health and heteronormativity, Moraga defends by incorporating and expanding her spiritual and familial understanding. Moraga incorporates her cross-cultural beliefs and practices around into the space around Rafael’s incubator, from healing stones and arrowheads to gifts from queer familia. Bost argues that Moraga “expand[s] her sense of family to include all of the bodies and machines that vulnerable bodies depend on” and that, “rather than fighting vulnerability, Moraga accepts it as an alternate ideal” (Bost 172-173). I argue that this is not necessarily an acceptance of an ideal, but an acceptance of openness.

Moraga must become open to the vulnerability and permeability that circles the newness of Rafael’s life; the illnesses that plague his newborn body, the aging of Moraga’s parents, the death of members of Moraga’s extended queer familia, including Tede, her uncle, and others. Moraga writes that “[w]ithout his knowing, [Tede] had been an intimate part of Rafaelito’s life… Is there a kind of queer balance to this birthing and dying… lesbians giving life to sons, our brothers passing?” (Waiting 62). In learning to be open, Moraga searches for patterns and meaning to alleviate the unpredictable nature of bodily vulnerability. Her fears in the text culminate when Rafaelito is taken into his final surgery. Moraga and Ella pray in the waiting room:

> In the midst of our prayer, I realize suddenly – so profoundly – that my tightest hold against death cannot keep Rafaelito here. The holding itself is what Rafaelito does not need. He needs to be free to decide: to stay or to leave… I can’t explain the feeling, that

> moment of saying to Ella, against every instinct in me, "We gotta let go." Wasn't it our vigilance that was keeping him here? In the letting go might he not slip from us completely? That was the risk, for what did we two know of death in this most intimate way? (Waiting 64-65)

In accepting her ignorance about and impotence to defend against death, Moraga places agency into her child's hands and into death's hands: "But in that gesture of releasing him, I felt Rafaelito move toward us, toward life" (Waiting 65). Moraga does not allow vulnerability to render herself weaker or impotent, but open to change. Bost writes, "Creating a family and creating a life means creating something that is susceptible to death and disintegration. Accepting motherhood, for Moraga, is about accepting human vulnerability" (Bost 172). For Moraga to fully accept her position as a mother, she has to be open to the possibilities of death, disease, and alternative notions of health.

Moraga invites herself, her son, and her entire familia to be rendered as vulnerable, but that vulnerability lends itself to agency. In allowing her son to choose between life and death, in granting him agency, he "moved toward" her. While in previous moments Moraga raged against vulnerabilities that she was impotent to change—her maternal lack, her forced removal from Joel's life, Ella's abjection, the Western medicine that sustains Rafael—Moraga admits that she is powerless against, perhaps even ignorant of, death. It is openness to possibility and change, whether negative or positive, that creates agency in Moraga's life, even in the face of institutions that challenge her very subjectivity.

I do not mean to suggest that structural vulnerabilities can be solved or even alleviated by the acceptance of vulnerability that Moraga's narrative suggests. But for Moraga, a state of openness offered solutions to the personal vulnerabilities that flooded her pregnancy and early

motherhood. Bost argues, "Bodies must signify differently in a culture that values community, permeability, and divine intervention more than self-reliant individuals" (Bost 174). Moraga's Chicana culture and mixed religion values independence and self-reliance differently, and this is reflected in the way that she builds her queer familia. Although Moraga's butchness pushed her into a stoic and self-reliant subject position, the discovery of her desire to be a mother signaled the necessary permeability and vulnerability needed in the creation of another life. "Moraga's focus on the processes of giving life to Rafael Angel presents a vivid example of this possibility" Bost writes, by "incorporating another being and then physically dividing, removing pieces of body in surgery, and linking bodies to networks of machines and caregivers" (Bost 174). The bodily experience of giving birth and subjecting one's body to medical intervention necessitates dependence and permeability; but in this dependence, Moraga also finds forms of agency and power even in a culture that attempts to erase her of all personal agency. Moraga redefines her identity in interdependence.

Writing the Wound

Moraga begins the second section of her memoir "I am afraid to write of these times, afraid somehow language will lessen what I know" (Waiting 57). Her statement begs the question: why write about it? Moraga and Anzaldúa both emphasize writing as a way of working through and healing wounds. Anzaldúa explains that for writers and artists, "living in a state of psychic unrest" is like a "cactus needle embedded in the flesh" that digs, aggravates and festers (Anzaldúa 95). To heal, Anzaldúa must "get down to the place where it is rooted in [her] skin and pluck away at it… making the pain worse before it gets better" and afterwards there is "[n]o more discomfort, no more ambivalence" (Anzaldúa 95). Moraga takes this one step further,

stating “I write the wound with hope that in the aperture I might create a better place for us to live” (“Cherríe Moraga” 169). Both women believe that their writing, despite its pain, is a positive force, just as vulnerability can be both a negative and positive state.

Moraga’s and Anzaldúa’s writing processes exemplify the physical nature of their writing, an embodied practice important to autotheory. Similarly, Trigo argues that skin, both thick and porous, is another metaphor for writing. He points to Moraga’s descriptions of skin as a “thick-membraned blood-smell” and as a “thick, rich, yellow liquid” (Waiting 67, 99). The simultaneous thickness and porosity join the body and language at an “ambiguous edge of the maternal experience” and challenges the notion that the body and the mind of the creative process are entirely distinct (Trigo 105). The line between inner and outer, pain and healing, the body and the mind is ambiguous. In revisiting diary entries and expanding on them, Moraga can simultaneously wound and heal at an ambiguous cite between the personal and the political, personal wounds from structural inflictions. Writing through wounds is a process of theorizing, as many argue of *Borderlands/La Frontera* and Moraga’s larger body of work.

In *Waiting in the Wings,* writing and maternity are both self-wounding processes. The difficult entrance of her son into the world and his precarious position in it disrupts Moraga’s writing: “*I feel as if something is broken in me, and yet I am forced to proceed along as if everything were normal. I am a mother now and I do not yet know how to fully inhabit that place in the world… My writer’s heart feels stolen by the struggle for my baby’s survival*” (Waiting 86). Pregnancy and mothering unfix Moraga’s understanding of herself, and she struggles to write from this destabilized and vulnerable position. While Anzaldúa argues that trauma and unrest is what spurs the artist to create, Moraga laments, “*It is hard to be a writer when there is no fixed me to be*” (Waiting 66). Moraga faced serious doubts about her ability to be a mother,

the "maleness" of her son, and her ability to raise him in a queer familia in a patriarchal world. The vulnerability that permeates every step of her memoir destabilizes her identity to the point of unfixing her processes of writing. Even the form of her memoir, which alternates Moraga's writerly voice before Rafael and after, suggests structural change in the way that Moraga's writing functions.

Although she is, at times, reaffirmed, Moraga struggles to self-wound through while both her body and identity are in flux. Trigo argues that Moraga "refers to the maternal" as both "an intermediary space between body and language" and as "wounded skin and as a self-wounding process that pierces the skin" (Trigo 103). The vulnerability required of writing wounds changes after Moraga experiences the intermediary space of maternity: "I am conscious of another entity always pulling on me… The writing isn't any less challenging, but now a hole has been created through which my child passed… Now the work-the art-passes through me differently. I can't say exactly how" (Waiting 95). There are parts of this embodied process she cannot explain, and the text suggests a continual returning to these physical changes in order to understand changes in emotion, identity, and subjectivity. Trigo suggests that the self-wounding involved in writing can, despite its pain, be "paradoxically protective, enabling, and even empowering" (Trigo 105, 109). Writing is the place where Moraga notices the changes of her body and feminist practice, a site of fear, confusion and pain. Yet it is also a source of protective power reminiscent of Moraga's defender position: a positionality that allows for resistance and power, even after Moraga experiences the vulnerability and permeability of motherhood.

For Anzaldúa, separating the writer's mind from the lived body is not possible: "A lack of belief in my creative self is a lack of belief in my total self and vice versa—I cannot separate my writing from any part of my life. It is all one" (Anzaldúa 95). Moraga argues for her own

separation from, or at least distinction between, the productive faculties of the maternal body and those of the writer. In a diary entry, Moraga writes, "*I write theoretically here when the urge is simply to create. My body now taking on the full shape of creation does not lessen my need for art*" arguing that the creation of a child is not the same as the creation of art (Waiting 44). Moraga may feel the need to separate her creation as a mother and her creation as a writer but that does not necessarily mean displacing one identity or the other. As Garay points out, "Moraga does not at any point relinquish her artistic identity, nor allow the creative power of maternity to overshadow artistic impulse" (Garay 204). Moraga has proved that she can operate from both her butch and mother subject positions: she also maintains the possibility of writing as a both a writer and a mother, separately and simultaneously. Her practices of writing are an implicit argument for the multiplicities of identity she urges for in her understanding of gender and sexuality. Moraga comes to accept vulnerability as a necessary part of her maternal subject position: her "separateness" must become permeable, and that permeability renders the construction of her queer, feminist life vulnerable to the power of patriarchal and heteronormative standards. Writing lends her a sense of agency over her vulnerabilities and allows her to control the permeability of her mind, body, and writing. Openness rather than, or even in addition to, defense.

Chapter 3: Vulnerability Through Citation and Relation in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*

Autotheory is always already citational and relational. Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* is so from the core, taking its name from a text often cited as yet another precursor to a potential autotheory genre:

> A day or two after my love pronouncement, now feral with vulnerability, I sent you the passage from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* in which Barthes describes how the subject who utters the phrase "I love you" is like "the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without ever changing its name." Just as the Argo's parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the Argo, whenever the lover utters the phrase "I love you," its meaning must be renewed by each use, as 'the very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new.' (Nelson 5)

Feeling her vulnerability exposed, Nelson reaches for a citation to explain herself. Her method of citation, and other methods of citation or relationality found across autobiographic and critical works, *renews* language by citing it. Autotheory not only critiques theory by arguing for a restoration of the self in theory, but also posits the relational nature of knowledge development and writing. Fournier claims that "Autotheory has an interesting relationship with margins, and writers and artists who work autotheoretically often extend the conceit of writing, annotating, and scribbling in the margins in conceptual ways" (*Autotheory* 138). But a reader's relationship with marginality and citation extends far beyond the page, orienting how we live in language. *The Argonauts*, implicitly and explicitly, presents a case for citation not just in writing, but in the very way we express what we are too vulnerable to communicate ourselves (the inexpressible).

On Genre and Citation

The Argonauts enters my thesis as a fraught text, as both the organizing inspiration that pulled my disparate interests together as well as a text that exemplifies the dangers in preemptively or decisively categorizing young genres and subgenres. In her introduction to *Arizona Quarterly*'s 2020 special edition on autotheory, Robyn Wiegman writes that "When read as paradigmatic for the new genre it is said to found, *The Argonauts* stages autotheory as an encounter between first person narration and theory as an established body of contemporary academic thought," a style of autotheory connected to, yet distinct from, autotheory that does not so directly and ubiquitously interact through marginal citations (Wiegman 1). Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa each lean into their specific cultural knowledge and social capital, but Nelson's racial and educational privilege—her cultural knowledge is of the academy—allows her to capitalize on her whiteness and life experience differently. Part of the particular joy in reading *The Argonauts* is how Nelson makes the personal public *and* the academic perverse: for students of literature, theory, philosophy, and/or feminism interest lies in the text's assumption of "a great deal of cultural capital" through the "elliptical style" of "marginal citations" Jackie Stacey points out (Stacey 204). However, the ubiquity of the citations may also be alienating, confusing, or downright illegible without this specific cultural capital or interest in high theory and high art, making *The Argonauts'* style seem, at times, in direct contrast to other examples of autotheoretical writing.

Denoting *The Argonauts* as "autotheory" on its back cover (perhaps a capitalist impulse to capitalize on creativity) risks making *The Argonauts* a misleading, off-kilter center to a budding genre-ization of autotheoretical texts. Many writers who practice or incorporate autotheory rarely make such direct, ubiquitous references to established bodies of work: as

Wiegman writes, "Other experiments in self-narration that now travel under the moniker of autotheory have significantly different aesthetic approaches and theoretical dimensions, making it important to resist the lure to position *The Argonauts* as the genre's north star" (Wiegman 1). Wiegman's concern is not unfounded: in searching for literary articles containing the phrase "autotheory," I found that over 60% of my search results offered analyses of *The Argonauts*, and over 90% of articles mentioned *The Argonauts* as connected to the genre[5]. Lauding *The Argonauts* as a definitive example is potentially antithetical to the practices of autotheory in that it threatens to limit the expansive, creative impulse that autotheoretical practices draw from.

Further, when *The Argonauts* is already claiming autotheoretical practice, what is left to prove about autotheory? As Mollie Ann Kervick points out, "While a memoir so steeped in academic criticism may at first seem like a goldmine for academic critics who wish to analyse the text—on the contrary, *The Argonauts* presents an intellectual conundrum for the academic critic who may attempt to approach the text systematically" (Kervick 2). Because of her marginal citations and direct theoretical musings, Nelson does much of the heavy lifting in literary interpretations of her own life-writing: "*The Argonauts*… feminism into conversation with queer theory, generating a text that is representative to philosophical and theoretical questions relating to queerness and normativity, relationships and family structures, feminism and motherhood, and the philosophical and material capacities of language" (*Autotheory* 137). The questions that *The Argonauts* generates are difficult to answer, and many likely have no single answer. On a narrative level, *The Argonauts* explores Nelson's relationship with artist Harry Dodge and his transition alongside Nelson's pregnancy and the birth of her son Iggy. Nelson frequently

[5] In my research, I found thirteen articles published since 2015 that discuss autotheory in the literary sense described throughout this thesis. Of these thirteen articles, twelve directly mention *The Argonauts,* and eight of these articles spend significant time on literary or cultural analysis of the text.

juxtaposes "radicality"[6] or queerness alongside heteronormativity, interrogating the ways her pregnancy—and therefore her changing body and relationship with Harry—is both radical and normal in the twenty-first century. In this chapter I take on a close, literary study of *The Argonauts* beyond a surface level examination on her use of citations and her work on queer theory, as is often found in articles addressing autotheory, to consider how Nelson incorporates autotheory beyond citation.

Autotheory occurs in the aperture between structural and personal vulnerabilities. If the marginal citations and theoretical writing act as structure, and the embodied writing is deeply personal, then the autotheoretical impulse lies, for Nelson, where the marginal and personal meet: or, perhaps, where the structure of Nelson's narrative (as narrative as *The Argonauts* can be) begins to break down. Kay Mitchell argues in her study on vulnerability that "*The Argonauts* reveals the vulnerability of the writer, particularly the writer who puts herself, her personal experiences and feelings, into her work—'contaminating' that work, and making herself open to shaming" (Mitchell 196). While vulnerability may make us open to shaming, refocusing the openness of vulnerability as a more neutral aperture of possibility can allow us to reimagine what this "contamination" accomplishes. Vulnerability is an openness to being affected, and affecting others, in negative and positive ways: Nelson practices autotheory, on one level, by contaminating the citational with the personal. Conversely, she also contaminates the personal with the citational.

[6] "Radical" and "radicality" are difficult terms to pin down in Nelson's text. My uses of the words "radical" and "radicality" here consider two definitions of the term, "very different from the usual or traditional" and "favoring extreme changes in existing views, habits, conditions, or institutions" ("radical", "radicality").

The Argonauts is not only structurally citational, through the margins, but citational in its very conception. Nelson pulls the term autotheory from Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie*. She also takes the title of her work from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* and, as Fournier claims, "reitarat[es] the form that Barthes innovated" in *A Lover's Discourse* (*Autotheory* 138). Barthes' work not only serves as inspiration and but also presents a similar mission in the context of vulnerability: "One of Barthes' aims in writing *A Lover's Discourse* was to elevate the discourse of lovers—an everyday discourse, as well as a private one—to the realm of critical theory" (Fournier 143). Just as Nelson contaminates academic space, Barthes attempts to elevate vulnerable discourses to meet public discourse. Nelson's project, and perhaps the larger autotheoretical turn, is invested in citation to both negate and accentuate vulnerability.

Nelson already calls into question, through her theoretical and citational writing, structures of power, oppression, and resistance, leading her reader to question in what ways resistance against oppression is still viable, yet alone radical. By investigating structures that (dis)order her life through citation, Nelson explores that which renders her categorically and individually vulnerable. As this vulnerability comes to a precipice in the text, structure and theory break.

Identity Politics and Structural Vulnerability

Nelson and Harry are introduced based on their diverging relationship with language. Nelson addresses Harry writing, "Before we met, I had spent a lifetime devoted to Wittgenstein's idea that the inexpressible is contained—inexpressibly!—in the expressed...Its paradox is, quite literally, *why I write*, or how I feel able to keep writing" (Nelson 3). In contrast, Harry "had spent a lifetime equally devoted to the conviction that words are *not* good enough. Not only not good

enough, but corrosive to all that is good, all that is real, all that is flow" (Nelson 4). Nelson's work sometimes mirrors Moraga's emphasis on the embodiedness of writing as language contains lived experience in ways that are counterintuitively inexpressible in writing. Fournier points out that the trouble in Nelson's (and Moraga's) claims for Harry: "On the most obvious level, language is limited in its use of gender pronouns: 'Dodge is neither male nor female,' and is therefore always already limited in/by language'" but that by "[e]mbodying the practice of autotheory, fragments or pieces of the text become the means by which Nelson expresses (and, by the logic of performativity, constitutes) her love for Dodge, as well as the means by which she generates new theory in her work" (*Autotheory* 137). The citational nature of Nelson's work both highlights and refutes the limitations of language in expressing the inexpressible, or even the practical limitations of naming and identification. Language is both limiting and the vehicle for generation new means of expression.

Nelson poignantly clarifies the stakes of identity for herself, Harry, and their budding relationship under heteronormative and patriarchal ideologies through anecdotes of personal interactions and gratings against state and educational institutions, like Prop 8 in California or the doctrinal statements of Biola University. Nelson shares a moment early in her relationship with Harry when, at a party, a woman asks if Nelson has been with other women before, as "[s]traight ladies have always been hot for Harry" (Nelson 8). This interaction leads Nelson to question not only Harry's shifting identity, but the labels of their relationship and how Nelson herself identifies: "Was Harry a woman? Was I a straight lady? What did past relationships I'd had with 'other women' have to do with this one? Why did I have to think about other 'straight ladies' who were hot for my Harry?... Why was this woman, whom I barely knew, talking to me like this?" (Nelson 8-9). This moment sets up a line of interrogation into how public perception

affects identity as Harry and Nelson are vulnerable to questioning and interpretations of their relationship, as well as how their identities shift in relation to one another. Nelson points out how, on even the level of language, popular understanding and language fails to accurately describe personal desire, especially in reference to institutionality: "One of the most annoying things about hearing the refrain 'same-sex marriage' over and over is that I don't know many—if any—queers who think of their desire's main feature as being 'same-sex.'" (Nelson 25). This failure of language stems from an inability to see around patriarchal and heteronormative ideology: "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 25). Popular language is unable or unwilling to capture the nuance of personal desire and identity if those conceptions rattle the institutions and ideologies that inform and structure language. From casual conversation to institutionalized and regulated uses of language, relationships and individual identity are subject to imperfect public perception and flawed signification.

Just as Nelson's conversation with a stranger alludes a certain naivety about perception, Nelson describes a similar naivety when she and Harry realize that Prop 8 had a strong chance of passing in California, writing "We were surprised at our shock, as it revealed a passive, naive trust that the arc of the moral universe, however long, tends towards justice. But really justice has no coordinates, no teleology" and they set off in search of a wedding ceremony (Nelson 23). Nelson opens the reader to an understanding of how queerness is structurally vulnerable under heteronormative patriarchy, subject to its linguistic and legal parameters. By emphasizing a lack of "coordinates" or "teleology," Nelson emphasizes how illogical and even unpredictable the structures that instigate structural vulnerability in individuals' lives can be.

Nelson's early interrogations into identity and vulnerability prepare the reader for more complicated conversation—both citationally and in Nelson's own lines of questioning—about maternity and queerness. Reflecting on her relationship with Harry's first son, Nelson describes stepparents as "structurally vulnerable" (Nelson 21). However, motherhood in many, if not all, forms is also structurally vulnerable, especially for mothers who experience pregnancy and birth. Pregnancy and motherhood are subjected to social and ideological institutionality, in part, because of their vulnerability *and* their power: as Adriene Rich writes in *Of Woman Born,* "Patriarchy could not survive without motherhood and heterosexuality in their institutional forms" (Rich 43). Patriarchy and heteronormativity are reliant on motherhood to sustain power, and motherhood is, in turn, vulnerable to being shaped by language, ideology, and institutions. Rich argues that motherhood and heterosexuality have to be treated "as axioms, as 'nature' itself, not open to question except where, from time to time and place to place, 'alternate life-styles' for certain individuals are tolerated" (Rich 43). Nearly forty years later, Nelson is interrogating what "toleration" of non-heterosexual motherhood means, in terms of both public perception and her own identity, when heterosexual motherhood is the axiom. Nelson's identity and pregnancy are vulnerable to the degrees of tolerance and nontolerance that afflict her.

Motherhood, as an institution that serves heteronormative patriarchy, is tolerated and sustained, while certain individual *experiences* can become a fraught, intolerable endeavor under that *institution*. As a queer mother, Nelson necessarily must confront both forms of motherhood: the experience that delivers the raw material of this text, as well as the institution that threatens to reject her maternal subjectivity. Further, the heteronormative-coded acts of pregnancy and motherhood can also threaten to reject or subsume Nelson's claims to queerness. If autotheory

occurs where vulnerability creates openness or apertures, a text of queer pregnancy points to the institutional and personal vulnerabilities that occur when motherhood is examined.

The pregnant body is subject to all of the physical vulnerabilities that come with gestation and birth as well as the vulnerabilities, gaps, and oppressions that persist in social constructions, ideologies, and medical institutions, especially for women of color in the United States. Kate Collins in her study of "The Morbidity of Maternity" in *The Argonauts* writes, "Women of color and queer women experience heightened vulnerability within our contemporary biopolitical system because they fall outside of normative social positions" (Collins 320). Nelson's work considers the ways her pregnancy falls outside the normative institution of motherhood *and* outside some of the radical notions of queerness privileged in the queer theory Nelson engages. In her study on queer motherhood in the United States, Julia M. Thompson writes in *Mommy Queerest* (2002), "The phrase 'lesbian mother' conveys a logical implausibility, an oxymoron, deriving from the 'fact' that lesbians are presumptively non-procreative and that mothers are presumptively heterosexual" (Thompson 6). Thompson places our cultural understanding of maternal subjectivity on a binary spectrum: heterosexual, nondeviant motherhood on one side, and nonmaternal sexual deviancy—lesbianism or queerness—on the other. The mother cannot be sexual, and the non-heterosexual individual cannot be a mother: therefore, Thompson argues, the way "lesbian mother" functions as an oxymoron "in various public discourses reveals deeply rooted cultural anxieties about the meanings and practices of both lesbianism and mothering," or, more broadly, anxieties about queerness disrupting the nuclear family structure and therefore the heteronormative patriarchal order (Thompson 6). In the strict ideological constitutions of lesbian bodies "current heteronormative formation typically discourages maternal practices" while "[m]others' bodies are regulated by ideological discourses that proscribe the enactment of

'perverse' or nonnormative erotic desires" (Thompson 16). Extending Thompson's assertion about the control of lesbian bodies to any queer bodies, the social, ideological constitutions of queer sexuality and maternal bodies are regulated and separated in our culture. How can social constructions of both motherhood and queerness become expansive enough to move beyond Thompson's interrogations of "lesbian motherhood" into queer motherhood of many varying forms under heteronormative patriarchy? Nelson begins to answer this question by opening herself to questioning and shaming through the images of vulnerability she presents as a mother and as a sexual being.

Hybridity and the Body

Thompson's solution to understanding the intersections of motherhood and queer identity is to consider the concept of hybrid identity, as "[h]ybridity calls into question the boundaries between the self and other, between insider and outsider" (Thompson 10). Hybridity can be a useful concept in speaking about pregnancy itself, as the pregnant body blurs the line between the *self* and the *other* quite literally. Nelson calls into question the subject position of the pregnant woman as an insider and outsider in the social construction of herself and her child: the "pregnant body in public… radiates a kind of smug autoeroticism: an intimate relation is going on—one that is visible to others, but that decisively excludes them" (Nelson 90). The hybridity of the pregnant body—at once the mother, child and their private relationship—"especially irritates the antiabortionists, who would prefer to pry apart the twofer earlier and earlier" as the "sooner you can pry the twofer apart, the sooner you can dispense with one constituent of the relationship: *the woman with rights*" (Nelson 90). Even while our constructions of motherhood call for mothers to be entirely devoted to their children, the autoeroticism and private nature of

the relationship between a mother and her fetus causes a problem when it comes to reproductive futurism. The pregnant woman in public, as Nelson states, "[D]isrupts our usual perception of an other as a *single* other. The static of facing not one, but also not two" (Nelson 91). The pregnant woman is no longer just an other—and the queer, pregnant woman is no longer just an othered-other—but a hybridity that blurs the line between individual autonomy and social, ideological-insiderism of heteronormative patriarchy.

Nelson's pregnancy renders her an "insider" in terms of heteronormative and patriarchal institutions, but threatens her subjectivity in relation to the LGBTQ+ community: "How can an experience so profoundly strange and wild and transformative also symbolize or enact the ultimate conformity? Or is this just another disqualification of anything tied too closely to the female animal from the privileged term (in this case, nonconformity, or radicality?)" (Nelson 14). As Thompson discusses in *Mommy Queerest* and as Lee Edelman suggests in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), some, including some individuals in the LGBTQ community, believe that queer people have no business in reproducing as reproduction continues to support oppressive structures: even Kervick states, "The argument can be made that through her whiteness, financial privilege and job stability, as well as her relationship with a male-identifying[7] individual, one could classify Nelson as a person who is responsible for perpetuating a heteropatriarchal neoliberal order" (Kervick 3). In privileging nonconformity or radicality, pregnancy moves from "wild and transformative" in both body and social order to contributing to patriarchal, heteronormative standards. But as Nelson asks throughout her memoir, "Is it not idle to fault a net for having holes?" (Nelson 46). If the institution of (queer) pregnancy is no longer radical under the grasp of heteronormativity, how can Nelson reclaim a sense of the

[7] Nelson does not specify that Harry identifies as a male, but rather "is happy to identify as a butch on T" (Nelson 53). A more apt phrase for Kervick's point might be "male-passing" rather than "male-identifying."

radicality she, and perhaps her audience, privileges? One way to do this is through radical vulnerability that interrupts both experience and institution.

Hybridity and vulnerability play into the ways that sexuality and maternity affect each other. Like a good autotheorist, Nelson shows how of the overlap between sexuality and maternity—and therefore society's qualms about sexual or erotic motherhood—begins in the body, in its desires and drives. In *The Argonauts*, Nelson plays with the concept of a sexual maternal figure, intertwining intimate and theoretical discussions of sex alongside meditations on pregnancy and newborn mothering. Nelson reflects on a parenting book that reassures mothers that having sexual feelings while breastfeeding "[doesn't] mean you're a pedophile freak" but rather that "the hormones unleashed by breast-feeding are the same as those unleashed by sex" and therefore a mother "could be forgiven for the mix-up" (Nelson 44). Nelson asks, "But how can it be a mix-up, if it's the same hormones? How does one go about partitioning one sexual feeling off from another, presumably more 'real' sexual feeling? Or, more to the point, why the partition? It isn't *like* a love affair. It *is* a love affair" (Nelson 44). Nelson asks why, if desire arises from the body's signals, should there be shame in the hormonal signaling of desire? Where does the obsession with separating a mother's sexual subjectivity and child's well-being come from? Nelson writes, "[T]he culture's worrying over pedophilia in all the wrong places at all the wrong times made me feel unable to approach [Iggy's] 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 little butt! Now I delight in his little butt!" (Nelson 42). As Nelson claims her love for her child and her child's body, she must consciously undo social constructions she is vulnerable to in order to find pleasure in mothering. Hybridity allows Nelson to both mesh and separate the vulnerabilities required of mothering and of being a sexual figure, noting that these two

subjectivities require different kinds of openness: “I had always presumed that giving birth would make me feel invincible and ample, like fisting” (Nelson 86). Maternal care, maternal subjectivity, and the maternal body require flexibility, compartmentalization, and yet sometimes conflation: this especially true for mothers who experience pregnancy as well. Like the hormonal soup of breastfeeding, some sexual desires and maternal actions cannot be separated because they occur in the same body, in the same organs, across the same nerve endings and hormonal channels.

Pregnancy requires physical and emotional vulnerability. It is, as Nelson writes of labor, an experience that “*demand[s]* surrender” (Nelson 134). Nelson describes the “[p]owerlessness, finitude, endurance” of pregnancy, and the vulnerability she must give over as the baby physically rearranges her body: “The *capriciousness* of a growing baby. The way a baby literally *makes space* where there wasn’t space before… The rearrangement of internal organs, the upward squeezing of the lungs” (Nelson 103). She must also relinquish the idea of control over the baby itself:

> You are making the baby, but not *directly*. You are responsible for his welfare, but unable to control the core elements. You must allow him to unfurl, you must feed his unfurling, you must hold him. But he will unfurl as his cells are programmed to unfurl. You can’t reverse an unfolding structural or chromosomal disturbance by ingesting the right organic tea. (Nelson 92)

The mother is rendered vulnerable by the presence of the fetus in her body as the body is susceptible to rearranging by the fetus, and emotionally, structurally vulnerable to the ways the fetus’s development does or does not align with constructed expectations. And yet, our cultural ideology that controls mothers also expects the mother to control their child’s development.

Nelson feels the spurn of her doctor when she asks: "*Why do we have to measure his kidneys and freak out about their size every week if we've already decided we are not going to take him out early or do anything to treat him until after he's born?*" The doctor replies, "*Well, most mothers want to know as much as possible about the condition of their babies*, she said, avoiding my eyes" (Nelson 92). It is not possible for the mother to be entirely responsible for the well-being of the fetus in utero. The mother might be radically intimate with their pregnancy, yet they cannot access or control its development. While it is acceptable for the mother to be rearranged by the fetus (it is unstoppable), it is not always acceptable for the fetus to be vulnerable itself (although that is often unstoppable as well).

Vulnerability, or openness, also allows for redefining of structural identity: a hybridity of gender is reimagined through the hybridity of pregnancy. Nelson reflects that "it took me by surprise that my body could make a male body. Many women I know have reported something of the same, even though they know this is the most ordinary of miracles" (Nelson 87). Despite the ordinariness of her pregnancy—a female body creating a male body—the emotional openness to affecting and being affected—the definition of vulnerability—still enables surprise at difference. However, this condition of openness also allows a reimagining of self: "As my body made the male body, I felt the difference between male and female body melt even further away. I was making a body with difference too. The principal difference was that the body I made would eventually slide out of me and be its own body. Radical intimacy, radical difference" (Nelson 87). Through radical intimacy, or vulnerability, Nelson can come to better understand radical difference. Nelson's specific theorizing is not possible through theory or structure alone: it requires the vulnerability found in pregnancy.

"the touching death part"

Perhaps the precipice of vulnerability in pregnancy is the experience of giving birth, where the individual undergoes radical physical and emotional transformation in fully separating mother and child. Nelson cites Alice Notley, who describes birth as being "undone" and "obliterat[ing] [her]self," and responds that "I have never felt that way, but I'm an old mom. I had nearly four decades to become myself before experimenting with my obliteration" (Nelson 37). Nelson's willingness to "experiment" with "obliteration" is certainly a choice of openness and vulnerability. However, the task of the body throughout pregnancy is to remain as invulnerable as possible: "The task of the cervix is to stay closed, to make an impenetrable wall protecting the fetus, for approximately forty weeks of a pregnancy" (Nelson 124). It is only after forty weeks that, "by means of labor, the wall must somehow become an opening. This happens through dilation, which is not a shattering, but an extreme thinning. *(O so thin!)*" (Nelson 124). Nelson does not feel obliterated, undone, or shattered by this feeling, describing it instead as a "dilation" and "extreme thinning." Rather than an obliteration of the self, it is a vulnerability of the self, physical and emotional. A thinning, and an openness.

Vulnerability must be understood not as an inherently weak or negative positionality, but rather as a condition of openness to being affected in negative and positive ways. While "obliterated" or "shattered" subjectivity certainly carries a negative weight, "thinning" suggests a different feeling entirely. Nelson writes, "This feeling [of thinning] has its ontological merits, but it is not really a good feeling. It's easy enough to stand on the outside and say, 'You just have to let go and let the baby out.' But to let the baby out, you have to be willing to go to pieces'" (Nelson 124). There is a gap between "ontological merits" and "feeling" that warrants emphasis, despite its simplicity: giving birth cannot be done in theory. Despite all the varying discourses

and vocabularies on the wholeness or shattering of the self in maternity, Nelson's individual experiences are just that: individual. Creation in the mind—mothering in theory—is not the same as (pro)creation in the body and maternity in practice.

Regardless of the differing language to describe "going to pieces," the structural vulnerability of the body and subjectivity in giving birth is apparent. Nelson writes of labor that "If all goes well, the baby will make it out alive, and so will you. Nonetheless, you will have touted death along the way. You have realized that death will do you to, without fail and without mercy" just as labor is not something a pregnant woman does, but that "[*l*]*abor does you*" (Nelson 134). This might be considered the ultimate vulnerability that crosses every intersection of human identity: that the body is vulnerable to pain, decay, and death. In giving birth, through shattering or thinning, the vulnerability of the woman's body to labor is reminiscent of the human body's vulnerability to death. As the narrative of *The Argonauts* (as much as one can say *The Argonauts* has a narrative arc) circles closer to the birth of Iggy, and therefore a brush with death, the thematic and formal elements of the text circle closer to death and degeneration.

Throughout *The Argonauts,* Nelson's voice moves from a more neutral, almost academic voice, to a voice that addresses the reader, to directly addressing Harry. These voices vary in rawness based on who is being addressed and why: the ambivalent voice discusses queer theory and art history, while the most raw voices address Harry and reflect on their relationship: "*You've punctured my solitude,* I told you" Nelson writes, addressing Harry as "you" (Nelson 5). Nelson jumps between these perspectives and storytelling modes, from heavily theoretical to pages with several citations to just Nelson's voice and experience alone. As the text moves towards a climactic scene of Iggy's birth, Nelson's musings turn from heavily citational and focused on identity, sexuality, and relationships towards longer anecdotes with fewer citations.

Her interrogations turn more inward and reflective. Nelson indulges in pages full of danger and personal reflection, discussing her stalker obsessed with *Jane: A Murder* and her fears of karmic retribution for writing about her aunt's murder. Nelson juxtaposes the process of protecting herself and her family from her stalker alongside anecdotes of her late pregnancy and looming labor. For example, Nelson describes the comfort in hiring a man to "cover" their home and her discomfort when he leaves—"By the third night of Malcolm's watch, I started having delusions that he could sit outside our family home forever, to protect against whatever. But the money had run out, as had the logic of our enterprise. We were on our own" (Nelson 124). Following a line break, Nelson creates a parallel through the laboring body: "The task of the cervix is to stay closed, to make an impenetrable wall protecting the fetus…" (Nelson 124). Nelson's narrative style compares the vulnerability of her home and family to a stalker to the vulnerability of her pregnant body. As the stakes of vulnerability give way to danger and brushes with death, the juxtapositions become more obvious and the citations fade.

Soon after these moments, Nelson begins recounting her narrative of labor alongside the narrative of the death of Harry's mother. As she describes Harry's mother's decline, Nelson slips into the second person voice that directs her commentary at Harry: "We each anguished differently and severely: you wanted to give her the care she'd once given to you, but could see it was breaking out new household to try" (Nelson 126). The narrative voice that speaks directly to Harry takes up more time and space on the page as she recounts this arduous journey of illness and death, drawing the conflict between the production of life and release of death closer.

As Nelson labors and the narrative circles closer to the moment of birth, the narrative breaks from its previous patterns. Nelson's voice gets smaller, speaking in single lines and stunted sentences: "They measure again: seven. That is good" and "Hours later, they measure

again. Still seven. Not so good" (Nelson 129). As she receives medication to spur labor on and she loses track of "where the baby is" the narrative splits into Harry's voice fully, as he recounts the final moments of his mother's life (Nelson 129). At the moments of ultimate vulnerability—a laboring mother's brush with death—the autotheoretical voice fails. Harry must, temporarily, take over the narrative to explain the function of human's vulnerability to death, or more specifically, a mother's vulnerability to death in relation to her child. Harry writes, "[*e*]*ach of the volunteers told me that it was my job to let my mom know that it was okay to go. i believe that i was unconvincing for the first 33 hours of my time with her*" (Nelson 129). It becomes Harry's responsibility, as a child who is "*going to stay on earth in this form*" to explain death to his dying mother and give her permission to be open to that vulnerability. Harry tells his mother that "she was surrounded in love, surrounded in light" opens the bathroom door to allow "*a foot long thick rectangle of light*" to cover her and lays down to sleep (Nelson 130). The narrative switches back to Nelson, who draws a parallel in her word choice: "It's very dark now. Harry and Jessica are asleep. I am alone with the baby. I try to commit to the idea of letting him out. I still can't imagine it" (Nelson 130). While Nelson works to purposely "commit," her language reveals that she knows it is only openness and vulnerability, "letting him out," that will work; a vulnerability that must be permitted and enabled by another.

The passages into life and into death become an ultimate crossing between individual and structural vulnerability: it cannot be hidden, avoided, delayed, or ignored. Harry describes his mother's death in detail, then writes, "[*s*]*he was in the doorway of all worlds and i was in the doorway too. i forced myself not to disturb her, she seemed all at once to know where she was going and how to get there*" (Nelson 131). Just as the passage into life requires a threshold—the cervix—Harry recognizes that his mother is passing through a different doorway. Just as "*labor*

does" the mother, in death Harry's mother "*know[s] where she was going and how to get there*" (Nelson 131). Nelson follows this passage with the final moments of her labor, and Iggy's birth. She reflects here on "touching death" and wonders "if I'll recognize it, when I see it again" (Nelson 135). While we cannot know if Nelson will feel as if she recognized the death she touched during birth, I can suggest that it is the openness, the aperture of vulnerability, that may be recognizable. The permission for the body, or life or death, to do as it wishes to us. Just as this brush with death interrupts the body, it ruptures Nelson's narrative without breaking it. It does not shatter the narrative, as Harry's voice is one of many in the margins and he speaks of himself with a lowercase "i," but the narrative is disrupted and the reader's connection to Nelson that has been sustained throughout the text is thinned: (*O so thin!).*

Vulnerability in Writing

Nelson or her editors may consciously claim to practice autotheory in terms of joining together citation and experience, but Nelson's experiment with the autotheoretical impulse goes much further than that, challenging the format of her text and the continuation of her narrative. Her raw experience—raw to the point of rupturing of her voice—is what allows us to theorize on the connection between life, death, and vulnerability. In some ways, Nelson readily admits avoidance of or discomfort with vulnerability in the text itself:

> *You've written about all parts of your life except this, except the queer part*, you said.
>
> *Give me a break*, I said back. *I haven't written about it <u>yet</u>*. (Nelson 32)

Nelson had published poetry and deeply dark work on her aunt's murder but had not written about the queer parts of her life. In choosing to write about maternity and all of the loaded cultural constructions that come with it, Nelson opens herself to interrogations about the

queerness of her experiences. While the question still exists about whether she can or would want to be accepted into the institution of motherhood, another question is whether queerness will accept her experiences of motherhood. In writing through all of these questions and unknowns, Nelson writes herself into a position vulnerable to critique, interrogation, and nonacceptance, but also a position of power, knowledge, and acceptance of a multitude of subjectivities. But do those potentials make writing oneself into vulnerability any easier?

In some ways Moraga and Nelson, writing nearly 20 years apart, have opposite missions. Moraga writes *Waiting in the Wings* as a statement, a warning, a homage to the pain and trauma that heteronormativity and patriarchy can inflict:

> When I got to the end of the book, though, I decided to break up this overly romanticized vision of the queer nuclear family. I wanted to show the less romantic side of queer family life, adding ambiguity—will the family stay together?—to emphasize just how powerfully racism and homophobia in society can destructively work their way into queer family life. ("Cherríe Moraga" 172-173)

Nelson writes, as does Barthes, a text that uses vulnerability and citation as a statement of love and joy: "Nelson's performative use of citations in *The Argonauts* fosters intimacy at the level of form; extending this to the themes of her text, Nelson frames the practice of sharing theory… as an intimate, meaningful act between to queer lovers" (Fournier 146). In *The Argonauts*, Nelson's sharing of language is an exercise in expressing vulnerability. In *Waiting in the Wings*, Moraga's process of dramatizing past trauma presents an expose on the structural renderings of vulnerabilities. Both expose how they are rendered vulnerable, and both claim agency through vulnerability, but approach the communal sensibility of sharing experience differently.

Nelson's style of writing, even with all of the heavy moments and intellectual quandaries, maintains a certain boldness and confidence throughout *The Argonauts*. Yet, Nelson claims, "My writing is riddled with such tics of uncertainty. I have no excuse or solution, save to allow myself the tremblings, then go back in later and slash them out. In this way I edit myself into a boldness that is neither native nor foreign to me" (Nelson 98). Implicit in Nelson's language is the connection between writing and the body through "tics" and "tremblings." "Slash[ing]" also suggests editing as a violence against the self. Nelson admits that an edited "boldness" is "neither native nor foreign to me," which both begs and answers the question of authenticity in her work: does slashing uncertain or trembling language in favor of boldness make the raw material more vulnerable, or less? When Harry sits down with Nelson to discuss how she writes of him, Nelson asks, "*How can a book be both a free expression and a negotiation? Is it not idle to fault a net for having holes?*" (Nelson 46). I argue that even with just oneself, an autobiographical work is still a negotiation between original language and edited language, tics and boldness. The autotheoretical impulse may be captured in the first draft or edited in later. There may be an impulse to value the impulsive autotheory over the planned or edited, just as radicality may be valued over the status quo.

While many of Nelson's questions cannot be answered, she sustains their relevance by using vulnerability to answer the demands of privileged terms in queerness and motherhood: radicality, resistance, community, relationality, and proclamations of love. The vulnerability in her work moves from theme to structure, bringing forth the autotheoretical voice and making it stutter under the force of vulnerability. *The Argonauts* does the two-sided work of autotheory, bringing theory to meet the self and injecting the self back into theory. But Nelson's work is far

more than thematically and structurally citational: it is deeply personal, bodily, and steeped in vulnerability.

Conclusion

I still argue for hesitation, as Robyn Wiegman does, in reinforcing *The Argonauts* as the north star of autotheory. However, there is something to be said about the popularity of Maggie Nelson's work in what Lauren Fournier calls the larger "autotheoretical turn" of literary and academic work. Just as Nelson powers her narrative with citation, *The Argonauts* is a more powerful statement of autotheory when read in the context of the histories of autotheoretical work. Daniel Peña writes in his post "*The Argonauts* Is A Direct Descendant Of Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera* And No One Is Talking About It" that "Nelson is conscious of the canon she's working in—both thematically and stylistically" and that, for instance, "*Borderlands/La Frontera* as part of that lineage and discussion too" (Peña). Nelson is conscious of Anzaldúa, Moraga, Lorde, and the dozens of other names that dot her text: it is necessary to study her text in context, especially if her work may be a direct descendent of the radical work of women of color. Fournier notes that "Anzaldúa takes space in her book to recognize her work as work and her poetry as poetry—a move that brings to mind 'self-care,' in Lorde's sense, according to which it is 'an act of political warfare' for the marginalized—willful survival and self-assertion in the spaces that have been hostile to them" (Fournier 148-149). Autotheory can be a radical move of self-assertion that considers the self-as-subject as an expert of their own experience and theoretical work. Autotheory has the potential to consider the deconstruction of borderlands, which is why attempts to name inclusion and exclusion from a genre seems a fraught, maybe perilous endeavor: "Put simply: by creating a critical discussion built on binaries—this is the white hybrid literary canon; this is the brown hybrid literary canon—the critical conversation perpetuates the same kinds of violence that both Anzaldua and Nelson try to deconstruct in their writings" (Peña). Centering the conversation on *The Argonauts* risks

perpetuating the violences of whitewashing and elitism that autotheory, as a historical practice, seeks to confront and repair.

Implicit in autotheory's name is a complicated relationship with both academic rigor and boundless creativity. Fournier writes, "On their blog, kc asks who has access to writing texts like *The Argonauts*, and answers that it is those who have already established themselves as legitimate within the terms of academia (or relatedly, of contemporary art). For whom is autotheory a truly reparative practice?" (Fournier 26). Before the publications of *Zami* and *Waiting in the Wings*, Lorde was an established poet, Moraga an established playwright and life-writer, and both were leading figures in writing for women of color. Their ability to hedge such radically creative, intellectual, and culturally demanding work was likely assisted by relatively established publication history and writing practices, as well as the work of small, feminist and women of color presses like *Aunt Lute Books, Kitchen Table Women of Color Press,* and *Firebrand Books.* Nelson had already published several books of poetry and nonfiction and earned a PhD in literature before *The Argonauts* hit the shelves and gained popularity. To consider what a larger autotheoretical turn might mean for both academia and the publishing industry, we must consider the "the politics of access and power around the production of theory and the reinscription of what constitutes acceptable knowledge in the spaces of higher learning" especially if autotheory is to be considered a feminist practice (Fournier 26-27). How can autotheory both claim serious space in academia and maintain its sense of the fugitive or radical?

Lorde, Moraga, Nelson, and Anzaldúa used all of the ways of gathering knowledge available to them: bodies, culture, formal and informal education, and other lived experiences. Fournier asks of Nelson if "being honest about one's own limitations and theoretical shortcomings in a text preemptively defend these shortcomings from criticism? Within the

context of contemporary feminist theory and practice, is this kind of self-effacing honesty rhetorically or philosophically effective or subversive, or does it reinforce what is stereotypically expected of women?" (Nelson 167). I am reminded of a quote from Joan Didion's *Blue Nights*, where she defends her late daughter from accusations of privilege: "I was not unaware as I did so that a certain number of readers… would interpret… that Quintana did not have an "ordinary" childhood, that she was 'privileged'... 'Privilege' remains an area to which—when I think of what she endured, when I consider what came later—I will not easily cop" (Didion 75-76). Nelson's own understanding of privilege seems like a direct response: "I would also like to cop easily to my abundant privilege—except that the notion of privilege as something to which one could 'easily cop' as in 'cop to once and be done with,' is ridiculous. Privilege *saturates*, privilege *structures*" (Nelson 97). Privilege, including privileged terms, structures and saturates our language. Writers like Didion or Rebecca Solnit certainly exercise a theoretical impulse in their 'new journalism' style (which also first gained traction in the 1960s and 70s) using personal experience as a grounding factor in their journalistic exposes. But there is a lingering doubt to their texts as autotheory, and many nebulous reasons why I did not choose them for a thesis on autotheory and vulnerability (and that reason cannot be privilege alone). What do other autobiographical texts lack that limits their presence in the autotheoretical conversation? Is it, as Fournier suggests above, an element of reparative practice?

I hope that this discussion is not, and will never be, limited to the authors already put into the conversation on autotheory. In preparation for this thesis, I considered dozens of women's autobiographies that vary in style and subject, from graphic novel to trauma narrative (which as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* shows us, even these genres are not spared from entanglement). In terms of modern texts, what fits into autotheory as genre? Autotheory as practice? Autotheory as

impulse? *Hunger* (2017) by Roxanne Gay is radically and painstakingly vulnerable. *Are You My Mother?* (2012) by Alison Bechdel thoroughly incorporates psychoanalysis and theory into a graphic novel. *In the Dream House* (2019) by Carmen Maria Machado might present a formal innovation of autotheory practice, rehashing an abusive relationship by breaking the narrative into literary tropes and tools. Texts like these are why I understand autotheoretical practice and impulse to be more useful categorizations than genre, and hope that these terms can become incorporated into both autobiography studies and critical theory studies, as both disciplines expand and rearrange. Thematic and formal innovations in life-writing will continue to be published and refresh what we understand as autobiography, and we must make room for considering what space theory occupies in life-writing.

The question left to be answered is how or if autotheory can be a truly reparative practice. Part of my hesitation lies in the use of the word "truly," especially as it relates to truthfulness and authenticity. Why is reparative the privileged term, and what are autotheory's other goals? I have argued that autotheory can only function through vulnerability. Vulnerability suggests a need for those privileged terms of honesty, disclosure, and authenticity: certainly, a writer cannot be vulnerable without a concerted effort in authenticity. But how do you measure authenticity, and how does authenticity relate to the truthfulness or exactness of reparation and sincerity? Autobiographical work, and autobiography readers, maintain a privileging of honesty, or disclosure, or authenticity, or as "the tension between autobiography and fictionalization" is complicated by "the problematics of honesty and disclosure" (*Autotheory* 165). Each of the works in this thesis admit to fictionalizing in some way: Lorde through the definition of biomythography, Moraga in a note on dramatization and fictionalization, and Nelson in passages on editing and negotiation. I return to Moraga's practice of writing through wounds while

journaling, a practice that only presumes authenticity for the writer herself (until and if that work is later shared). Authenticity changes through revisitation and negotiation. Vulnerability will always be mediated through language, and language can be both reparative and destructive. Perhaps this is how vulnerability in the autotheoretical impulse can reinstate agency: authorial decision making allows for the choice of sharing vulnerability, while the authorial voice makes claims to authenticity regardless of whether the experience is precisely factual. Autobiography typically assumes factuality with allowances for gaps of memory, slippery language, and protection of identity and vulnerability. Autotheory functions differently. Autotheory does not assume authenticity as a function of factuality, but as a function of the choice of vulnerability. Committing to language means committing to openness, to be affected.

One could argue that writing of any genre is in some way vulnerable. What autotheory does differently is make vulnerability an integral part of the process, a two-way street that both demands surrender and returns agency. It can privilege any terms it likes, whether reparation or radicality or authenticity, and leaves it to the reader to determine whether the author has made themselves appropriately vulnerable to meet the demands of that term. But by allowing a space for vulnerability to be seriously considered, autotheory not only recognizes subjectivity but engages with the self *as* subject.

After Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, and Maggie Nelson

What follows are three "found" poems from three random pages from the preceding chapters over the course of my writing this thesis. Autotheory is relational and citational. When tired of writing and editing this thesis, I would grab a marker and pull a page from the trash, black out sections of the text, and arrange what was left if I liked the result. (This is also great for discovering how often words repeat in your writing, a useful and frustrating exercise.)

Acceptable Annihilation
after Audre Lorde

Tested after the age of fifteen,
panicked, disheveled, alarming:
remain silent and later,
in the evening, take arsenic.

That was an accident. Hide her.

The truth?

Without comfort or compassion,
the merciless fumbling assault.

As if,
as if in the flames
she could be forged into some replica
of mythology.

Although, chronologically,
the pain will never hurt too much:
just a demon intent on destroying you.

The only way—
the secret—
(it is the last dream of children)
to be, forever.

Breast of an Unanswered Prayer
after Cherríe Moraga

Deceit, protected from the failure
of god-fearing males. The need
to defend patriarchal powers
is never quite as specific as fear.

No extended understanding,
she constructs her life in protest.

What she does offer:
Our female deformation.
Feminist rhetoric.
The living woman-wound.

To accept vulnerability
separateness must become permeable:
the unconstruction
of impervious skin.

Despot, ambiguous, terrorizing
to erase their bodies.
To embody is also her vulnerability.

Obliterating Herself
after Maggie Nelson

She responds, “I have never—
but I had decades to experiment
with willingness.”

The task of the body to remain,
the task to make an impenetrable wall.
Only after that, by means of labor,
the wall must somehow become an opening.

Dilation is not shattering, but extreme:
understanding obliteration
is an inherently negative position.
A condition.

Subjectivity only carries a negative weight—
entirely ontological—
but not really a good feeling.

To stand on the outside,
you have to go to pieces.
Despite its simplicity, giving
cannot be undone

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