

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

“THE GREAT SOUP OF BEING”: AUTOTHEORY & INTERSECTIONALITY IN CHERRÍE
MORAGA’S *LOVING IN THE WAR YEARS* AND MAGGIE NELSON’S *THE ARGONAUTS*

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ABSTRACT

“THE GREAT SOUP OF BEING”: AUTOTHEORY & INTERSECTIONALITY IN CHERRÍE MORAGA’S *LOVING IN THE WAR YEARS* AND MAGGIE NELSON’S *THE ARGONAUTS*

BY CLAIRE FIELDMAN

This thesis asks the following question: why is fluid form appropriate and even necessary in intersectional feminist narrative – and how does such form reflect changing politics of feminism and of theory? I will extrapolate from two hybrid works by two unique intersectional feminists, Cherríe Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years* (1982) and Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015), to explore this relationship between form and politics, or the ‘autotheoretical’ and the political. These works, though written in their disparate personal and political contexts, share a number of formal similarities and an investment in “queering” or reconstituting gender, sexuality, and domesticity. Accordingly, I map the paradigm shifts in form, content, and politics in which Moraga and Nelson participate in each of the three major sections of this thesis. I situate the two works against a theoretical background that includes José Esteban Muñoz’s *Disidentifications* and Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson’s *Strange Affinities*. Ultimately, I argue that Moraga and Nelson find a shared critical energy that proves significant not in spite of difference but because of it and that this energy anticipates a future with more fluid understandings of both genre and identity.

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“The Great Soup of Being”: Autotheory and Intersectionality in Cherrie Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years* and Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*

Introduction

“I am acutely aware of those moments when language illuminates, gives body to something which was before vaguely known to me, like a dream that stays, but stays distant, indecipherable...I am equally aware of the times when language kills, diminishes, truncates the creative impulse and dream of change” (Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, 176).

“Acute awareness” serves as an appropriate formulation of Moraga’s relationship to her words: of the simultaneously illuminative and destructive power of language for a writer seeking to make her experience legible to herself and to others. She may indeed be able to render a part of herself comprehensible that was previously unknown or “vaguely known”, yet full knowledge “stays distant, indecipherable” and may even be “killed, diminished, truncated” if words prove evasive. Writing of her experience as a Chicana lesbian feminist and of imperatives for the feminist movement, Moraga navigates the powers and pitfalls of language as she finds the unique form her narrative will take. As much for the personal as for the political, she must leverage both the articulable and the “indecipherable”, harnessing her words to carve out a form and a society for which they are uniquely suited.

Moving outward, these few sentences encapsulate the ability of form to coevolve with its content, for “language” to “give body to” an emerging narrative or iteration of political activism. For the feminist movement in which Moraga participates, new forms of narrative and of rhetoric have emerged as the political stakes of the movement have evolved. The forms of the patriarchy were certainly inadequate to articulate feminist existence, as were, for women of color and queer women, the forms initially employed by mainstream white feminism. Thus, like Moraga, these women were tasked with finding the language to “illuminate” something only “vaguely known”

to hegemonic society: their individual and collective experiences and oppressions. Texts such as *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Moraga along with Gloria Anzaldúa, serve as a testament to the subsequent formal innovation. The multiplicity of rhetorical modes and languages within this anthology serve as a reflection of the multiplicity of identities occupied by each of its contributors, a series of complex narratives that demand a hybrid form capable of conveying contradiction and nuance. Accordingly, this thesis asks the following question: why is fluid form appropriate and even necessary in intersectional feminist narrative – and how does such form reflect changing politics of feminism and of theory? I will extrapolate from two hybrid works by two unique intersectional feminists, Cherrie Moraga's *Loving in the War Years* (1982) and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015), to explore this relationship between form and politics, or the 'autotheoretical' and the political.

Loving in the War Years offers a rich example of such formal innovation, bridging poetry, autobiographical prose, and socio-historical analysis as well as the two languages of English and Spanish. Though intimate and rooted in her own lived experience, Moraga's text participates in communal discourse and feminist activism, deepening the stakes of her personal narrative. As theorist Sandra K. Soto describes, Moraga's "biography is never meant to be so 'auto' that it is not collective, and her narrative transformations are never so individual that they are not components of a manifesto" (242). On the level of both form and content, Moraga's text recognizes its own political and even identitarian ("collective") potential, seeking to simultaneously destabilize conventions of genre and patriarchy. It is both her "biography" and her "narrative transformations" that reject classification and regulation at a political moment in which categorical breakdown was particularly central.

Utilizing a similar breed of “autotheory”, Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* offers a contemporary iteration of queer/feminist theory that too is incredibly hybrid in its form. Rejecting traditional formal strategies in the same vein as her rejection of traditional notions of gender, sexuality, marriage, and family, Maggie Nelson creates a work as unique as the narrative it recounts. A text without chapter division or clear chronology, Nelson’s narrative thrives in its very lack of cohesion, reflecting the inherent tension of Nelson’s queer identities and the heteronormative society in which she lives. Operating within a space of “in-between-ness”, in the words of Gayle Salamon, or “bearing-loose-witness”, in Kaye Mitchell’s estimation, Nelson’s text is innovative in its indeterminacy, facilitating fluidity between criticism and literature as well as within understandings of gender and sexuality. As these understandings themselves necessarily become fluid, so too must the form in which they are reflected and, more broadly, the ongoing feminist discourse in which they participate.

This discourse operates within a theoretical background – specifically, queer and feminist theory – that has also experienced a paradigm shift in the direction of inclusion and formal innovation. In their work *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*, Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson argue that women of color feminism and queer of color critique offer a discourse particularly suited to the theoretical landscape of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries due to their rejection of categorical organization. Hong and Ferguson posit such work as a “language to describe what has been rendered unknowable through normative comparative method” (16), or what has gone unrecognized and underdeveloped in queer and feminist theory before the modern moment. Though Nelson is white, her queerness and non-normative domestic configuration nonetheless enables her to participate in this tradition to an extent – as a contributing guest, perhaps – while

also “queering” white feminist discourse. This positionality in many ways epitomizes José Esteban Muñoz’s conception of disidentification, another of my theoretical touchpoints.

Disidentification offers a form of narrative resistance that recognizes one’s self to an extent in cultural or theoretical portrayals while resisting the intrinsic limitations of such structures. A work that disidentifies, then, is hybrid and inherently invested in the destabilization of dominant theoretical concepts and identitarian categories. Further, disidentification orients a project toward the future, toward new understandings of identity and of narrative, and even toward systemic change. Theorists invested in queer futurity (Lee Edelman) and in “queer world-making” (Kevin Duong) ask *who* is offered participation in future theoretical conversation and, more profoundly, *who* is given access to future social institutions. Contemporary queer and feminist theory wrestles with these precise questions, as well as with the construction of a language for the previously “unknowable”. Put differently, the evolution of white feminist to adapt to women of color concerns and to include a broader spectrum of gender identities and sexual orientations heralds an analogous evolution in the forms of feminist narrative. If the personal and the political remain interdependent, then personal narrative and political discourse remain so as well. Thus though imbricated in their respective political moments, texts like Moraga’s and Nelson’s inherently invest in political movements toward a less heteronormative and patriarchal, “queerer”, future.

In this thesis I will map these paradigm shifts in form, content, and politics in each of its three major sections. To begin, I will define and deconstruct the genre of “autotheory” within which Moraga and Nelson write, examining which characteristics of autobiography and theory serve as relevant tools for queer and feminist narratives. Then, I move to the relationship between hybrid form and intersectional content, with *This Bridge Called My Back* as an

additional focal point beyond my two primary texts. Lastly, I will situate Moraga's and Nelson's work within their disparate contexts but similar political projects, particularly in relation to their treatment of domesticity. Both texts, though profoundly personal and unique, offer a window into underlying changes in each of these arenas, cementing their continued relevance for theoretical exploration and resonance as narrative projects.

I. Genre-Queer: Expansion of Autobiographical Fluidity via Hybrid "Autotheory"

When examining the formal strategies employed by Moraga and Nelson and their respective stakes, it is useful first to situate these texts generically. Each text borrows conventions from autobiography and from theory, with Moraga's text extending further into the realms of poetry, history, and even myth. Thus each author practices an inherently hybrid form that can loosely be given the name of "autotheory" (to borrow from *The Argonauts*' book jacket). These choices are neither arbitrary nor accidental; rather, they enable Moraga and Nelson to articulate a form that is particularly suited to the project of telling their stories in all their radical complications. As Tiana Reid articulates in her piece "The Shape of Poetics to Come: On Taking Up the Task of Criticism", both Moraga and Nelson seek to "...exploit the feminized sphere of the 'personal' beyond the codified literary-critical 'memoir' genre" (144), to engage with the project of "the 'personal'" while challenging the perimeters of the "codified literary-critical 'memoir' genre" or even autobiography as a whole. By exploring discourse on autobiography and placing each text within contemporary theoretical conversations, one can begin to identify these authors' unique yet similar navigation of the literary landscape as well as their strategies of political resistance.

A. Genre(s) of Autobiography

In their book *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson aim to articulate the conventions and components of autobiography, a project that becomes increasingly complex when they attempt to construct the categorical distinctions that define this genre. In its most narrow sense, “autobiography” denotes a straightforward, chronological self-narration of a series of events or of one’s personal development. However, in practice, texts that fail to satisfy such a template are nonetheless considered to be autobiographical, such as epistolary narratives built through a series of letters and poetry anthologies loosely but purposefully selected to tell one’s life story. Thus a rigid definition of autobiography becomes increasingly difficult, and sub-categories emerge to accommodate boundary-pushing forms. To this effect, Smith and Watson identify “Sixty Genres of Life Narrative” in the appendix to their work: from traditional academic classifications – such as autoethnography, bildungsroman, diary, and memoir – to titles emerging out of modern developments – such as “jockography”, self-help narrative and digital life story. Within this catalogue, however, remains the category of “autobiography”, begging the question of which texts (or, more appropriately, *whose* texts) are given access to this label while others are rendered extraneous variations.

One such sub-category, *testimonio*, offers one lens through which to read Moraga’s narrative. Its definition by Smith and Watson identifies “a novel or novella-length narrative” in which “the narrator intends to communicate the situation of a group’s oppression, struggle, or imprisonment, to claim some agency in the act of narrating, and to call on readers to respond actively in judging the crisis” (282). Though Moraga’s narrative does not conform entirely to this definition, her text can be understood as detailing “a group’s oppression/struggle” (e.g. the Chicana, in particular the queer Chicana) and certainly as possessing “agency in the act of

narrating”. “Readers” may indeed be prompted “to respond actively” in rejecting patriarchy, racism, and homophobia – or at the very least identifying their presence in Moraga’s lived experience. The (sub-)genre of *testimonio* further invokes a communal aspect, the situation of personal narrative within that of a sociocultural group and within political realities, that Moraga’s narrative also possesses. Sonia Saldívar-Hull’s article “Mujeres Testimoniando: No Neutral Position” underscores this essential characteristic, defining *testimonio* “as a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure” (334). Inherently grounded in “lived realities”, Moraga’s articulation of the position of the Chicana lesbian feminist “bears witness” to oppression and to marginalization and rejects “erasure” of such experience. Saldívar-Hull identifies the political functionality of *testimonio*, building off its definition in Smith and Watson’s appendix, one that involves “the knowledge of daily lives as a legitimate basis for theorizing and constructing an evolving political praxis” (334) – or the political harnessing of personal narrative. Furthermore, *testimonio* is a practice that “contests and transforms traditional disciplinary boundaries” (336) – a sub-category of autobiography but also a community of texts that reject classification. Though Moraga’s narrative cannot neatly be placed in this single category, this label offers an acknowledgment of fluidity, as well as personal and political intertwinement, that is particularly suited for the purposes of her text.

Nelson’s narrative, though possessing some of these identified characteristics, cannot comfortably be labeled a *testimonio* for identity-based reasons. A term from the *Reading Autobiography* appendix that may be best suited for *The Argonauts* is “relational life-writing”; however, like Moraga’s, Nelson’s text defies singular and straightforward classification. Relational life-writing refers to “the model of selfhood in women’s autobiographical writing...a

‘sense of shared identity with other women, an aspect of identification that exists in tension with a sense of their own uniqueness’” (278). Via her ruminations on pregnancy, motherhood, and femininity, Nelson’s narrative does reflect this “sense of shared identity”, as well as “tension” between her participation in such community and the “uniqueness” of her experience with queer partnership and procreation. She identifies as both part of and apart from this group of “other women” (i.e. mothers and wives), making her narrative inherently “relational”; however, her narrative is more than an extended identification of similarity and difference. If Moraga’s narrative “bears witness” to a unique lived reality, so too does Nelson’s – to a lived reality that is communal yet individualistic, normative-domestic yet queer. In her piece “Feral with Vulnerability: On *The Argonauts*”, Kaye Mitchell delves into this “bearing-loose-witness (the looseness an indication of its necessarily improvisational, impressionistic, lovingly makeshift quality)” (195). With her qualification of the “necessarily...makeshift” character of Nelson’s form, Mitchell implies the possibility that Nelson’s narrative can be relational in some aspects while also extremely intimate, “...elaborating a politics and ethics of vulnerability in both its thinking and its formal qualities, thereby showing us the radical aesthetic, personal and political potential of this state of apparent unguardedness” (194). Foregrounding “aesthetic...and political potential”, Mitchell recognizes the stakes of intimacy (“vulnerability”) within narrative on the level of both form and content, as well as the vulnerability of relationality within (and, even more so, on the margins of) community.

The simultaneous adherence and non-adherence of each text to its respective appendix definition (chosen as one of many that may prove relevant) underscores the complex and fluid nature of sub-genres and, more broadly, of autobiography itself. As Smith and Watson themselves acknowledge in their introduction, “what is called ‘autobiography’ is not at this

historical moment (and, we would argue, never has been) a unified form” (127). Put differently, the genre of autobiography is variable and heterogeneous, just as *Loving in the War Years* and *The Argonauts* are variable and heterogeneous. If autobiography is itself a fluid form, then these two texts are even more so. However, understanding autobiography as such does not diminish the unique and innovative character of these works. By selectively borrowing from numerous sub-genres, while shifting from the personal to the communal to the political, Moraga and Nelson transcend the single label of autobiographers. However, their choice of this genre as their primary one does not feel at all arbitrary; rather, its wide boundaries and opportunity for simultaneous individuality and community render it a desirable medium for critique-as-storytelling. As queer women with identities in numerous intersections, the position of Moraga’s and Nelson’s work on the boundaries of this genre not only underscore the continued necessity for further boundary-pushing but also the potential of form to remain political.

B. “The Many-Gendered Mothers of My Heart”: Theoretical Community

Transitioning from the autobiographical component of “autotheory”, both *The Argonauts* and *Loving in the War Years* actively participate in theoretical conversations as well. This is more directly applicable to Nelson’s narrative, as she explicitly cites a number of theorists and other aesthetic works throughout her text. However, Moraga’s text also engages – albeit less explicitly – with her theoretical moment, transitions in feminist theory as well as political activism. Expressing her qualms with the feminist movement, her connection and/or estrangement from analyses of historical-mythological figures such as La Malinche, and her lived experience with intersectional identity, Moraga’s work falls on the borders of theory and has since been the topic of much critical work. It is Moraga’s particular leveraging of personal narrative within such a theoretical framework that spurs some of the political resonance of her

text as well. The very mode of personal account enables the exposition of underlying limitations with theory and social thought, as an offering of alternative understanding or experience.

However, Nelson's more direct engagement with theory prompts closer observation, particularly surrounding the specificity of the theorists with which she chooses to engage. Her text contains numerous references to thinkers she repeatedly deems "the many-gendered mothers of my heart", or those with measurable influence on her work and her narrative. Nelson's particular diction of "many-gendered mothers" references her own experience with queer domesticity and child-rearing, opening up motherhood at even the linguistic level to its non-traditional referents: queer/gender non-binary folks and even men. Furthermore, she chooses to insert herself not merely within female-centric dialogue (e.g. feminist theory) but also with male-dominated fields as well (e.g. psychoanalysis), expanding the range of her text as a piece of theory.

On a related semantic note, even Nelson's modality of citation contributes to the unique character of her text and its inherent grounding in autobiographical narrative. Choosing informal and oblique marginal citations, with the only distinctions between her words and those she cites being italics, Nelson interweaves her narrative voice with theoretical voices at every turn. Such formatting serves to further disturb already-scarce boundaries within her text and further contribute to formal fluidity. Drawing once again from Kaye Mitchell, *The Argonauts*' "foregrounding of its intertextuality (and its fragmentariness) models a vulnerability of borders/boundaries, an interpenetration of words and ideas...that becomes its strength (through conversation, communion)" (197). As a fundamentally "intertextual" work that rejects "borders/boundaries" – including those between Nelson and her fellow theorists – Nelson's text finds some of its "strength" through such genre-defying "conversation" and through narrative-

theoretical “communion”. Further, such “intertextuality” and “fragmentariness” serve as projections for the future of theory itself; as Tiana Reid describes, “...criticism...up to the task of identifying and responding to contemporary contradictions” must itself “take a very ‘free form’” (140). Thus Nelson’s “strength” is not just her own; it proves indicative of the direction of the tradition in which Nelson situates herself.

Moving throughout Nelson’s narrative, this classification of “many-gendered mothers” intersperses hegemonic male theorists such as Freud and Winnicott with more radical voices such as Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and Paul Beatriz Preciado – proposing a community and even a continuity that seems rather counterintuitive. As Nelson’s lived experience fails to align with the male-centric eroticism postulated by Freud or the conventional motherhood examined by Winnicott, even her partial identification with their work feels unexpected. However, her project of simultaneous engagement with hegemonic male and divergent queer thinkers, of placing two ostensibly different groups of theorists in conversation with one another, plays a fundamental role in the innovative formal navigation of her text. Such navigation also, in Nelson’s own estimation, is endowed with a degree of necessity – of cementing survival of the queer subject within the academic institution and, more broadly, within hegemonic society. Citing French theorist Luce Irigaray, Nelson quotes, “The option left to me...was to have a fling with the philosophers” (39). Her only “option” as a queer individual and theorist is to “have a fling with the philosophers”, to find a relationship – however critical – to rather than entirely reject dominant figures and conceptions. Further, the language of “fling” implies brevity and superficiality, a concession that this engagement does not have to manifest in extensive agreement, but that theoretical articulation of queerness can indeed extrapolate from more traditional works and notions.

C. Muñoz and Disidentification

A radical piece of queer of color critique, José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications* offers a valuable paradigm through which to read Moraga and Nelson's work in conversation with their contemporaries. Muñoz's titular concept of disidentification involves simultaneously identifying with and against a social group, with an artistic representation, or, notably, even with a discursive genre. Defined by Muñoz in the introduction to his text, "disidentification...neither opts to assimilate within such a [dominant institutional] structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (11). This strategy is neither fundamentally oppositional nor passive; instead, it enables its subject to validate some aspects while recognizing restrictions or even outright problems in others. Disidentification is particularly significant due to the many levels on which it can operate and the many "structures" it can select as objects. In a straightforward sense, this concept can be applied to identity, particularly critical and selective allegiance to the ideology of an identity group with shortcomings – such as patriarchy in the Chicano movement and heteronormativity within feminism. Disidentification can be found within manipulations and unique iterations of genre – such as autobiographical works that resist structured temporality, lack of segmentation, and fluidity between languages and modalities of discourse. And, in its most direct application to politics, disidentification can facilitate broader access to hegemonic, often constrictive institutions – such as queer couples to the family and women of color to the feminist movement. One can choose membership to an identity category while pushing against its limitations, one can write within a genre or movement while introducing critical innovation to its conventions, and, politically, one can challenge the institution by operating inside of it.

Underscoring its stakes, Muñoz further theorizes disidentification as a mode of survival. He first introduces disidentification as a conglomeration of “survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). Such a conception centers lived experience, or “existence”, within a hostile society that practices “punishment” or “elision” of “the minority subject” through regulatory mechanisms such as patriarchy, heteronormativity, and white supremacy. Muñoz also articulates a “phantasm of normative citizenship” as this prescriptive and restrictive expectation, of the idealized (e.g. white, male, cisgender, heterosexual) majoritarian subject. A subject who diverges from such a norm, then, must undertake her own “negotiation” of society to carve out her place within it and, more simply, to survive. Disidentification figures into Moraga and Nelson’s own modalities of survival as articulated in their texts: for Moraga, aligning herself with *chicanidad* and with feminism but radically and uniquely so; for Nelson, claiming membership to the categories of mother and spouse yet retaining her queerness. Furthermore, the texts themselves disidentify with their predecessors and contemporaries, with works by theorists and activists that have enabled the disciplines of queer and feminist theory to exist but that themselves are flawed.

On the level of content, both Moraga’s and Nelson’s narratives offer instances of disidentification with regulatory institutions. A salient example within *The Argonauts* comes from Nelson’s narration of her spontaneous marriage to Harry Dodge at the seedy Hollywood Chapel the day before California Proposition 8 – illegalizing queer marriage – was passed by voters. Conceding that marriage was not necessarily an institution to whose membership she and her partner aspired to, Nelson nonetheless recounts a felt imperative to sanctify, or legally recognize, her union through matrimony. She disidentifies with the heteronormative and

hegemonic aspect of marriage while simultaneously choosing to participate in and even honor it. Nelson narrates, “Poor marriage! Off we went to kill it (unforgivable). Or reinforce it (unforgivable)” (23). Articulating that neither “reinforcing it” (tacit acceptance) or “killing it” (outright rejection) is acceptable, Nelson instead finds her own unique experience with marriage that falls somewhere in between. In doing so, she practices disidentification to construct her own form of survival within the domestic sphere, one that may indeed prove “phobic” and normative” (4) but may also offer space for queer resistance.

In regards to form, Muñoz himself articulates the particular applicability of disidentification to hybrid autobiographical genre. Considering the “autobiographer’s statement” in its productive creation, Muñoz offers that one “might come to understand the writer’s disidentificatory practice to extend to the ideological and structural grids that we come to understand as genre” (19). The notion of genre as “grids” is particularly interesting not only in that it denotes an inflexible blueprint but also in the composition of a grid itself, as a restrictive structure composed of straight lines and precise subdivisions. If genre truly is so inflexible and “straight”, then its assumption by a queer author necessarily involves disidentification. If autobiography – though itself a fluid category – still retains “ideological and structural grids”, Moraga and Nelson must then find a way to transcend such restriction by selectively working with normative practices. Further, Muñoz’s conception of autobiographical writing as fundamentally disidentificatory underscores the essential relationship between language and institutional authority. He outlines, “disidentification negotiates strategies of resistance within the flux of discourse and power” (19). Thus politics are intrinsically bound to narrative – and disidentification can interrogate this volatile interrelation to construct a path of “resistance” for the non-normative subject.

II. Heterotopia and Intersectionality: Form-Content Interrelation

Thus when considering the inherent political investment of Moraga's and Nelson's narratives, the manner in which they are shared becomes intentional and even indispensable. As form provides the vehicle for the delineation and subsequent dissemination of content, narrative can rarely – if ever – be considered as entirely independent from its modality. My earlier discussion of genre offers one window into this modality, as do specific choices of diction, syntax, and chapter partition (or lack thereof). Content, then, simultaneously becomes defined and enriched by its form – with each revealing something intrinsic about the other. In the case of *Loving in the War Years* and *The Argonauts*, such a form-content interrelation is illustrated through the relationship between intersectional identity and hybrid, or “heterotopic”, rhetorical mode.

A. Evolving Definition(s) of Intersectionality

Both Nelson and Moraga's works bear witness to intersectionality, the manifestations of interlocking identities and oppressions. First coined by theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in her piece “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” (1989), “intersectionality” offered a new lens through which to view the multifaceted oppression of black women specifically. Pushing against “the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (1), Crenshaw recounts a series of legal cases in which black women faced exclusion simultaneously from the black and female communities, not taken as representative of either experience. Identifying this particular marginalization as 1) rooted in lived experience and 2) more complex than a simple addition of race-based and gender-

based oppression, Crenshaw focuses on “the interaction of race and gender” (2) in contributing to such a position. She argues:

“Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (2).

Parsing a statement that was rather revolutionary in its time, Crenshaw’s articulation that black women experience an oppression “greater than the sum” of that which they face for being black or for being women introduces an additional dimension into identity. Component parts of identity do not operate in a vacuum and instead engender interactions that play just as much as (if not more than) a role in shaping one’s experience with the world. In terms of the implications of intersectionality for theory, normative frameworks that identify solely race or gender as the basis for oppression are rendered wholly inadequate; in Crenshaw’s words, they “cannot sufficiently address” or account for the lived experience of black women. Theory (and even discourse more broadly) – especially that which is race-based or gender-based – *must* become intersectional or it risks becoming irrelevant.

Now thirty years after Crenshaw’s groundbreaking article, the term “intersectionality” has functioned to reject continued marginalization of black women’s experiences, but has also evolved to encompass other experiences as well. In its contemporary sense, intersectionality is often used to refer generally to the various interlocking oppressions on the basis of identity – race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, citizenship status, etc. – that inform the way one moves throughout the world. Though black women continue to face some of the most acute oppression in the US and around the world, a transportable conception of intersectionality also enables feminist theory (and, ideally, feminism itself) to identify the particular dynamics that render other groups particularly vulnerable as well: trans women (especially trans women of

color), Native women, undocumented women, etc. In relation to Moraga's and Nelson's work, intersectionality proves invaluable in considering the multidimensionality of these narratives, as well the intertwinement between their content and their form.

Moraga's work does not seek to narrate solely her experience of identifying as Chicana (a term that, in line with the linguistic conventions of Spanish, already combines Moraga's ethnic and gender identities at the linguistic level) or as a lesbian; it offers an account of holding the identity of Chicana lesbian. Thus it follows that her experience is necessarily multifaceted and her text takes a form that reflects these attributes. Further, Moraga recounts her estrangement from the feminist movement as well as the Chicano movement, as each failed to center or even to consider the Chicana experience. Finding herself in a position of simultaneous both-ness and neither-ness, Moraga illuminates the inadequacy of either framework for her own liberation. Considering Moraga's text (as well as texts by other feminists of color) in line with Crenshaw's formulations does not seek to homogenize the experiences of all women of color; rather, such a framework offers space for continuity as well as points of departure, for shared solidarity as well as individuality. Furthermore, an intersectional approach underscores the limitations of hegemonic systems as thought (and even of political coalition) as inadequate vehicles for those whose experiences fall outside white, heterosexual femininity, those whose experiences bear most mentioning after years of their erasure.

Nelson, too, occupies a number of different identities whose intersections – and accompanying marginalizations – shape her lived experience as a queer white woman. Nelson, like Moraga, like Crenshaw even, is tasked with navigating complicated and contradictory experiences, as well as compounding disadvantages. Nelson also recounts her own experiences with exclusion from hegemonic practice: as a queer mother, the consciousness that motherhood

was not socially constructed for queer bodies; as a queer wife, the knowledge that marriage operates on an unshakeable basis (*de facto* and *de jure*) of rejection of queer couples. She offers the privilege of being seen and treated as a heterosexual couple (is this truly a privilege, in its erasure of the gender non-binary individual?) alongside the painful non-normativeness of testosterone injections. Thus, in the context of this thesis, what does it mean to read Nelson in conversation with Moraga, to posit two women from different eras and with radically different identities and experiences as “two intersectional feminists”? First, the formal similarities are striking, albeit unexpected, and the question follows of *why* such formal choices were made. Further, there is something radical in continuity, especially continuity within difference.

B. “Home Language”: Spanglish and Survival in *Loving in the War Years*

Before delving deeper into conceptual frameworks, it is useful to first examine a “case study” of sorts from Moraga’s text that illuminates the implications of such multifaceted form. In line with many other Chicana authors of her time and beyond, Moraga elects for a *mestizaje* of language that mirrors the *mestizaje* of her identities: interspersing her narrative with both English and Spanish without warning or translation. Moraga’s practice of code-switching within her work is a sophisticated and intentional one that underlies her presentation of its content. Admittedly, such a practice has direct implications for the accessibility of the text for monolingual readers. However, a choice to write entirely in one of the two languages would not only create a radically different experience with the text but also erase or prioritize one of Moraga’s multiple identities. In her piece “Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant: White Feminism and Women of Color”, Mariana Ortega articulates the particular investment of Moraga’s “Spanglish” in her own endurance as a writer and an individual: “In constructing herself via the mix of conquerors’ languages she finds survival” (64). Ortega’s rhetoric of

“constructing” suggests that one’s authorial voice and even one’s personal identification is one that is actively and dynamically built, an interesting framework for the examination of intersectional narrative. Further, it is not a persona or a character that is being constructed in Ortega’s conception; it is “herself”, again pointing to the contingency of self-development on linguistic choices. Moraga elects to situate her story, to find her personal identification, to “construct herself” not entirely in Spanish or in English but in “the mix” of both. Through this authentic choice – as well as this political statement of unique autonomy even in the face of “conquerors’ languages” – Moraga “finds survival”, authorial and personal.

It is overly simplistic and even illusory, however, to conceive of Moraga’s vernacular merely as a process of addition. Instead, Moraga creates a textual tongue that engenders new meanings, that alternates fluidly and variably, and that is unique to her identities and experiences. Ortega posits such a language as a “chimeric monster” that itself enables “Chicanas like Moraga... to construct an identity that cannot be neatly categorized as white or brown” (64) and, further, a text that also resists such classification. Such diction of monstrosity is notable, as it signals the messiness of sewing together identitarian, experiential, and rhetorical complication in a Frankenstein-like process. However, the end result is far from monstrous and is in fact seamlessly productive, a “home language: in the admixture of Spanish and English, and in the spaces and gaps between languages where new significations can be formulated...in linguistic stereo” (25), as Martha J. Cutter offers in her piece “Malinche’s Legacy: Translation, Betrayal, and Interlingualism in Chicano/a Literature”. Thus via “Spanglish” Moraga finds not only “survival” but also a “home”, a place for sustained personal and artistic growth, for “new significations” to come to fruition. She finds “meaning” in the “pursuit and exploration of a mode of voice that is both sexual and textual” that “lies not in the individual, unsupplemented

languages but in their semiosis, in their fission and fusion” (26). Moraga is a translator, an interpreter, and a creator of language just as she is a translator, interpreter, and creator of identity.

Such a concept of translation offers a point of departure regarding Moraga’s inclusion – and even reclamation – of the Malinche myth in the preeminent essay of *Loving in the War Years*, “A Long Line of Vendidas”. La Malinche, seen as the mother of the *mestizo* race but also the betrayer of the Mexican people in her affair with conquistador Hernán Cortés, offers an ‘origin story’ of both linguistic mediation and female marginalization. As such, Moraga’s invocation of another non-normative *mestiza* figure provides an opportunity for both continuity and divergence from historical-mythological tradition. Aligning herself with La Malinche as another *vendida* (a perceived “sell-out” to whiteness and/or masculinity), Moraga cements her own status as a female subaltern while simultaneously challenging the very basis for subordination in the first place. As Cutter describes:

“In the traditional reading of Malinche that Moraga interpellates, many binaries are maintained: mind over sex, man over woman, colonizer over colonized, cultural loyalist over cultural betrayer, heterosexual over homosexual, and so on. Yet by the essay’s conclusion Moraga has been able to destabilize many of these binaries and confront her fear of becoming like Malinche—an agent of cultural and linguistic ‘betrayal’—through an actual practice of translation” (24).

In Moraga’s eventual “destabilization” of the various “binaries” operating implicitly and explicitly within the Malinche story, she begins to dismantle the underlying patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies. By doing so, she reconstitutes her perceived “betrayal” of Chicana cultural norms (e.g. queerness, rejection of domesticity, etc.) as an act of “translation” between the norms of colonizer (American society) and colonized (her Chicano upbringing) as well as between both entities and herself. In a work that is fundamentally concerned with translating identities, Moraga’s focus on a translator figure is a significant one, reclaiming Malinche not

only as the ancestor of her people but also as the complex predecessor of her struggle (a “many-gendered mother of her heart”?). Further, Moraga finds her own rhetorical and personal grounding via her intentional leveraging of language, creating a space for herself in its junctures and its relationship to dominant narratives and identities.

C. *Strange Affinities*, Foucault, and Heterotopia

Conventions employed in queer of color critique offer another theoretical window for examination of Moraga and Nelson’s work on both the form and content level. In their introduction to *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*, Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson articulate the political and rhetorical stakes of such an inherently fluid and pluralistic genre. Hong and Ferguson posit women of color feminism and queer of color critique as projects uniquely suited to minoritarian and intersectional narratives: “in its deep critique of racialized, gendered, and sexualized devaluation of human life,” such work “gives us a blueprint for coalition around contemporary struggles” (3). Hong and Ferguson’s definition illuminates the multiple avenues for a project of queer of color critique: from a “racialized, gendered, and sexualized” landscape simultaneously. This excerpt also underscores the stakes of the project, one invested in exposing the “devaluation of human life”, one that facilitates “coalition”, one that is authentically rooted in “contemporary struggles”. Queer of color critique is thus an inherently political field, an oppositional narrative to patriarchy, homophobia, racial stratification, and beyond. Yet it is a unique rhetorical movement as well, one with the objective and ability to “create a language to describe what has been rendered unknowable through normative comparative method” (16). The significance of this pronouncement cannot be understated: women of color feminism and queer of color critique do not just aim to push the boundaries of prior theoretical-artistic work; they also endeavor to

“create” a new and unique “language” to make the “unknowable” knowable. There is insufficient room for intersectional queer/feminist narratives, Hong and Ferguson argue, in “normative comparative method”, so queer of color critique must (re)write a narrative reflective of complication and non-normative lived experience.

Moraga’s text can be said to participate in such narrative before such a formal label was solidified or even articulated; in fact, Hong and Ferguson explicitly mention her work in their introduction. Extrapolating from Moraga’s own expressed imperative for a “movement to make sense of”, Hong and Ferguson identify the “quest” for this movement “as the quest for a queer of color critique, as well as for a woman of color feminism” (12). Thus, once again, queer of color critique and women of color feminism provide a potential space to interrogate “the unknowable”, “to make sense of” contradicting identities, to authentically articulate the messiness of lived experience. If Moraga’s text participates in such a “quest”, then her writing becomes partially constitutive of the genre itself, and writing more broadly becomes a process of redefinition. Looking more closely at Moraga’s text specifically, her desire “to make sense of” is not a desire to create a set of new, neat categories; it is to destabilize identitarian classification altogether. In Hong and Ferguson’s words:

“Moraga frames the political project of women of color feminism and queer of color critique as a rejection of the ways in which bourgeois and minority nationalisms create idealized identities. Moraga’s alternative to these nationalisms, therefore, is *not* to establish ‘women of color’ or ‘Chicana lesbian’ as yet another idealized identity, an ideal type that replaces the ideal type of either the nation-state (citizen) or minority nationalism (‘Chicano’). Rather, she seeks to undermine the logic of the ideal type entirely” (11).

The conception of Moraga’s work as an inherent “rejection” is an apt framework for considering the political stakes of such narrative. Her writing clearly rejects “idealized identities” of ‘woman’ or ‘Chicano’, but it also rejects the thought of “‘women of color’ or ‘Chicana lesbian’” as alternative yet clear-cut category, or “yet another idealized identity”. It is not that

she discards or resists these labels altogether; rather, Moraga urges her reader to conceive of identity as inherently fluid, of labels like ‘woman of color’ as dynamic, complex, and unstable. In doing so, she destabilizes the basis of normative notions of identity as well as their imperative towards conformity – or, in Hong and Ferguson’s estimation, “seeks to undermine the logic of the ideal type entirely”. Operating in parallel, the mission of queer of color critique and woman of color feminism, as articulated by Hong and Ferguson, is also an inherent rejection, this time of stable genre and of strict convention. This project, then, becomes ideally suited for such work as Moraga’s, and the intertwinement of form and content within this work is underscored.

Nelson finds herself as a sort of adjunct to this movement – as a white woman, her experience cannot (and should not) drive its center, yet her work is inherently invested in its project. Nelson’s work, though not directly within the realm of Hong and Ferguson’s text, offers its own “strange affinities” for formal disjuncture and cognitive-textual dissonance, providing a supplementary example of theoretical “heterotopia” discussed in the introduction. This term finds its origins in Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things* and is loosely defined by Hong and Ferguson as “epistemological or discursive failure, disjuncture, or dissonance” (5). Unpacking this definition, “heterotopic” work challenges traditional “discursive” barriers, presents knowledge or experience in a fragmented or even “dissonant” manner, and is characterized by “failure” of coherence (or success of incoherence). Further, “heterotopia” invests itself in challenging convention and normativity. Hong and Ferguson articulate:

“...heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy ‘syntax’ in advance and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to ‘hold together’” (4-5).

Such articulation of the tendency to “destroy ‘syntax’” fits well with Nelson’s narrative; though her text is a prose work with standard grammar, Nelson’s syntax is nonetheless unconventional if a broader definition is invoked.

Hong and Ferguson’s notion of syntax as more far-reaching that “the syntax with which we construct sentences” can be applied to Nelson’s rejection of conventional citations, chapter partitions, and even divisions between theoretical and autobiographical discussion more broadly. Inserting her citations (of theorists, artists, etc.) in the margins with italics as the only indication that such words are not her own, Nelson facilitates narrative fluidity while sacrificing clarity of separation. In addition, her presentation of her narrative as one continuous piece rather than adopting chapters or even section titles (a notable point of divergence between her work and Moraga’s) constitutes a further challenge to “the less apparent syntax” often employed in literary work. By rejecting chapter partition, Nelson gives her work a simultaneous sense of coherence and overwhelming fragmentation, “holding together” her words so loosely that their relationship “next to and opposite one another” becomes complicated and even muddled. Such formal techniques mirror Nelson’s fundamental interest in the fluidity of identity— in the continuity between academic and domestic experience, between theoretical articulation and artistic expression, between partners who operate beyond conventional notions of gender and sexuality – and pushes against clarity of separation. Thus Nelson’s text indeed possesses many “heterotopic” attributes, rendering *The Argonauts* its own heterotopia and connecting it to queer of color critique and woman of color feminism.

At the linguistic level, Nelson situates herself at the intersection (or “disjunction”) of “dissonant” experiences and is particularly interested in “discursive failure” and “undermining language”. As a parallel to the unknowable/knownable paradigm employed by Hong and

Ferguson, Nelson articulates her own such dichotomy: the inexpressible and expressible. In only the second paragraph of her text, she writes, “I had spent a lifetime devoted to...[the] idea that the inexpressible is contained – inexpressibly! – in the expressed” (3). Nelson identifies the existence of the “inexpressible” in lived experience – the nuanced complication of identity, perhaps – yet maintains that it can be “expressed”, albeit “inexpressibly”. Though rather paradoxical (and, arguably, intentionally so), this statement mounts an implicit defense of language even in its “discursive failure”, in its ability to transcend literalism and reflect the intangible. In *her* “expressed”, in *her* iteration of auto-theoretical queer-feminist narrative, she provides a window into the “inexpressible”. Yet, simultaneously, Nelson’s pronouncement takes up the very task of “undermining language” identified by Hong and Ferguson, of asserting that there are pieces of life that are simply “inexpressible” via words or via narrative, that “unnameable things” (4) can and do exist. To assume Hong and Ferguson’s rhetoric, the existence of the unknowable will persist in spite of (because of?) the quest to render it knowable, and this is necessarily so. Accordingly, Nelson’s work becomes heterotopic in its precise illumination of and experimentation with the limitations of language, seeking to dissociate the reader from the implicit assumption that all that is articulated constitutes the entire picture.

Further, the very title of the work pays homage to the shifty evasiveness of language: as Nelson describes, “...the *Argo*’s parts may be replaced over and over but the boat is still called the *Argo*” (5), underscoring the “dissonance” of “...what reclaimed terms do – they retain, they insist on retaining, a sense of the fugitive” (29). How better to “undermine language” than to christen it “fugitive”? If Nelson’s text is constructed under a title of a “reclaimed term” that is fundamentally “fugitive”, then she solidifies the persistence of the unknowable – the “inexpressible” – in her writing and in her lived experience. Yet her work also solidifies and

reifies the power of language: a word, “Argo”, and a text, *The Argonauts*, bring unity to disparate parts, declaring them recognizable and valuable under one title. Thus in a counterintuitive manner, this very “inexpressible” is what endows her narrative with its richness and its authenticity – rendering “heterotopia” particularly suited for such complexity.

D. *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Loving in the War Years* as Macro-and-Micro-Heterotopias

Though in its own distinct manner, Moraga’s text participates in heterotopia as well, operating in its unique way to “destroy syntax”, to “undermine language”, and to resist neatness and straightforward classification. A salient example of the heterotopic nature of Moraga’s work is her aforementioned bilingual vernacular, dismantling both English and Spanish syntax as well as the division between the two. Yet Moraga’s writing is not fundamentally destructive; instead, in the (dis)juncture amongst the two languages, she creates space for a new language that is particular and authentic to her own experience. Such space offers her more potential to endeavor “to make sense of” the unknowable, to express the inexpressible – inexpressibly! – in *her* own unique modality of expression. In her piece “Cherrie Moraga’s Going Brown: Reading Like a Queer”, theorist Sandra K. Soto identifies the “undoubtedly queer” (237) – and inherently heterotopic – character of Moraga’s rhetoric. Soto points to “...Moraga’s uncanny aptitude for resignifying language” (237), or “...dehomogenizing it by noting the ways that her meaning-making speech acts perform radically different functions at various moments” (239). Like Nelson, Moraga is interested in the shiftiness, the “fugitive” nature, of words that can “perform radically different functions” in disparate contexts. In accordance with Hong and Ferguson’s conception of heterotopia, Moraga responds by “resignifying” and “demogenizing” such language, using its instability as an asset rather than a liability in the articulation of an “undoubtedly queer” narrative. Zooming out to the layout of the *Loving in the War Years* itself,

such fusion of disparate pieces of narrative and disparate genres offers an additional dimension of heterotopia, an additional example of “destroying syntax” in the broader sense of narrative continuity. Transitioning seamlessly from poetry to prose, to personal narrative to socio-historical study, the text constitutes a deeply interwoven fabric that mirrors the rich heterogeneity of Moraga’s own experiences. Even within the central essay on which this thesis directs its attention, “A Long Line of Vendidas”, Moraga constructs meaning in points of departure or cognitive dissonance, building cohesion not despite but due to variation.

Thus if *Loving in the War Years* constitutes its own micro-heterotopia, the germinal anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Moraga along with Gloria Anzaldúa, offers an example of macro-heterotopia, in the fusion of disparate pieces not by just one author but by several. Anthology in and of itself is fundamentally heterotopic, destabilizing the normative expectation of narrative continuity and progression by instead bringing dissonant voices together. The process of textual creation operates on multiple levels: the individualized writing of the anthology’s component parts and their subsequent inclusion and placement in relation to one another. Such a process offers a parallel to the articulation of intersectional identity, the definition of each particular identitarian label or affiliation in concert with the expression of its interaction with the others. Anthology is uniquely suited to such a project, to the reflection of “where multiple identities converge at the crossroads of a woman of color life” (“Catching Fire” xxii), Moraga’s own explicit definition of intersectionality. Could a text itself – rather than a set of oppressions or an iteration of feminism – be labeled “intersectional”? Regardless of the answer, there is something “inexpressible” in the ability of *This Bridge* to find unity in the disjunction between the various identities and experiences of its contributors – many of whom bring influential bodies of work on their own.

Further, there is something innate in the process of articulating the “woman of color experience” (a phrase which, in its singularity, is fundamentally misleading) that demands heterogeneity and heterotopia, that exhorts the creator to “destroy syntax” and challenge the limits of the knowable/expressible. And it is hardly coincidental that Moraga, at the forefront of this movement, identifies (even implicitly) with the project of heterotopia to the extent of participating at both the micro-and-macro levels.

III. Personal and Political Domesticity

In her introduction to *Loving in the War Years*, Moraga writes, “This feminist tenet, *the personal is political*, has provided me the poet’s permission to use my own life as evidence of what I believe to be true about *us* and *them*” (iv). Invoking her situation as writer via the phrase “the poet’s permission”, Moraga calls attention to the collective and even political dimension of text. She challenges the traditional barrier between “my own life” and “*us* and *them*”, between the author and reader or between the text and its society, justifying her intervention via said “permission”. Language and literature offer not only the potential but also the preferred mechanism for either reinforcing or dismantling this discursive division between “me”, “us”, and “them”. The former effect augments the uniqueness, the particularity, and the inaccessibility of the individual narrative (especially when said individual writes from a position of power); the latter underscores the communal investment, the shared values, and the sociopolitical applicability. Moraga participates in the latter, characterizing her experience as “evidence”, as partial manifestation of a broader social trend or movement with the capacity to reveal a more universal truth – or at least what she “*believes* to be true” [emphasis added]. Thus Moraga leverages “the poet’s permission” alongside a “feminist tenet” to advance her beliefs via her own

experience, to present her personal narrative as inherently political. And so her text becomes both personal and political – as does, though in its own unique manifestation, Nelson’s.

A. Different Political Moments, Shared Politics

In some ways, Moraga and Nelson write at strikingly different social and political moments. Moraga writes of a “journey of struggle, growing consciousness, and subsequent politicization and vision as a woman of color” (Preface to *This Bridge* xxxv), a time of radical reimagination of the feminist movement and of alternative models of coalition built around the lived experience of “Third World” women. Voices such as those published in *This Bridge Called My Back* – voices like Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, and of course Moraga herself – sought to interrogate the implicit normative within mainstream feminism as it currently stood: its claims of liberation for the white, heterosexual, cisgender woman built off the exclusion of those outside such a category. “Third World” feminists wrote not to claim access to a movement that denied them centrality but to engender a *new* feminism altogether: a feminism inextricable from liberation from white supremacy, imperialism, and homophobia, from a view of oppression as gendered, sexualized, *and* racialized. Such feminism is necessarily pluralistic and heterogeneous, resisting totalization and incorporation under the guise of liberal multiculturalism – as such, the employment of such disparate narrative structures within *This Bridge* feels particularly appropriate for its articulation.

Nelson writes in a feminist context that is seemingly more progressive – one in which gender studies departments have proliferated in academic institutions, in which women have made further steps toward legal and socioeconomic equality, in which intersectionality has become a centerpoint of feminist theory. Yet she undertakes a project that finds some shared basis with Moraga’s: one not of claiming her space within an inherently limited movement but of

describing her reengineering of the movement to meet the needs of her own space. Further, she challenges her reader to interrogate the benchmarks of achievement often cited by contemporary mainstream feminism: such as the role of the liberal university in absorbing gender studies into its project of multiculturalism rather than active resistance or the extent to which ‘legalized’ queer marriage only reinforces the hegemony of the nation-state and of gender norms. Reading these two texts as possessing a fundamental continuity, therefore, does not invalidate their uniqueness and points of difference; rather, it underscores the ongoing necessity of reconstructing feminism and reexamining who is/is not given access to its futurity.

As another element of continuity, both Moraga and Nelson select the domestic sphere in particular as a microcosm of such contradiction and thus an entity requiring reimagination. Moraga writes from the positionality of a female child, foregrounding her mother and her tense relationships with both her father and brother. She identifies her personal challenges within (but also without) *la familia*, the particularly revered institution of the family as a symbol of Chicana resistance and intergenerational survival. Nelson, on the other hand, situates herself in the vantage point of mother and spouse, engaging briefly with her identity as daughter but focusing much more on the new territory in which she finds herself. She writes as an adult grappling with queer partnership, queer motherhood and step-motherhood, and the simultaneous closeness to and estrangement from her own pregnant body. Each narrative utilizes domestic experience as an entrance point into a broader commentary on heteronormative (*and* homonormative) societal regulation. Thus though operating within the particular nuances of context, Moraga and Nelson find illuminations of collective experience and of collective sociopolitical critique.

B. “We Fight Back With [and Within] Our Families”: Moraga and the Alternative Domestic

Moraga's engagement with politics includes her interrogation of the patriarchy and heteronormativity within *el movimiento*, seeking to deconstruct the socializing power of the family as an institution. Titling a sub-section of her central essay "We Fight Back With Our Families", Moraga identifies the mechanism by which the Chicane family has been constructed as an impenetrable defense against colonization, a symbol of the endurance of *la raza*. However, she also calls attention to the extent to which this fight has simultaneously been fought against queerness and female agency:

"In fact, the forced 'choice' of the gender of our sexual/love partner seems to precede the forced 'choice' of the form (marriage and family) that partnership might take. The control of women begins through the institution of heterosexuality" (102).

In Moraga's estimation, the institution of the family functions in concert with "heterosexuality", both seeking to "control" the "form" of female domestic existence (even the literary form in which the woman articulates her domestic existence?). The lesbian, therefore, presents a two-fold challenge to this framework: via her rejection of heterosexuality *and* her divergence from the family as traditionally constructed. To evolve past marginalization of her queerness, her society must simultaneously unmake "the forced 'choice'" of heterosexual relationships – "the gender of our sexual/love partner" – and free up "the form...that partnership might take" beyond that of the family. "Fighting back with our families" thus must also involve fighting back *within* the family, underscoring the imperative for radical destabilization of domestic norms.

Further, Moraga articulates the particular role of her race in her experience with heteronormative and misogynistic conceptions of domesticity – hearkening back to the "collective psychology" behind the Malinche myth as perpetuating belief in "the inherent unreliability of women" (93). Within a fight, *el movimiento*, that relied so heavily on the symbolic strength of both *la familia* as a whole and its patriarchal centerpiece of the father/son,

Chicanas found themselves isolated from other women and forced into passive roles. Their oppression functions on the lines of gender and sexuality as well as on the lines of race, leaving them marginalized from both white feminism and *el movimiento*. Moraga identifies the operation of such marginalization on even the narrative level:

“It is unacceptable, however, for the Chicana to use white feminist sources to develop a theory of Chicana oppression...It is far easier for the Chicana to criticize white women, who on the face of things could never be familia, than to take issue with or complain, as it were, to a brother, uncle, father” (98).

Moraga, as a Chicana, finds herself excluded from “white feminist” discourse and thus unable to pull from such “sources” to articulate her own “theory of Chicana oppression”; as such, it becomes natural “to criticize” white feminism yet neglect necessary criticism of *la familia* (“brother, uncle, father”). A truly holistic approach, in Moraga’s estimation, would interrogate both whiteness and domesticity as oppressive – and interconnected – forces, leveraging such marginalization from both to crystallize an intersectional framework of oppression. Chicana feminists, then, may construct their own unique narratives and modalities of liberation via selective disidentification with both *el movimiento* and feminist rhetoric.

In her engagement with broader political questions, Moraga offers her personal narrative as testimony of domestic oppression as well as an alternate postulation of a female-centric *familia*. Presenting her lesbianism not as oppositional to the domestic-maternal but rather as its natural extension, Moraga retains her fidelity to her family (or at least her mother) while rejecting the necessary association of queerness with betrayal. She declares:

“...how was I supposed to turn away from La Madre, La Chicana? If I were to build my womanhood on this self-evident truth, it is the love of the Chicana, the love of myself as a Chicana I had to embrace, no white man...To be a woman fully necessitated my claiming the race of my mother. My brother’s sex was white. Mine, brown” (86).

Consistently portraying her mother in a positive light while rendering her white father passive and her white-passing brother domestically ineffective, Moraga elevates “La Madre” as an alternative center to patriarchal conceptions of *la familia*. She holds her love of women, of “womanhood”, as a “self-evident truth” rather than a transgression – a truth that necessitates embrace of “the Chicana” rather than the “man”, white or otherwise. Such embrace takes the form of both Moraga’s “love of myself”, her celebration of herself as woman, queer woman, and “brown” woman – “claiming the race of my mother” while also claiming participation in woman’s liberation. More broadly, Moraga’s personal “embrace” also advocates a collective reimagination of “La Chicana” inclusive of agency and of queerness. No longer can “sexuality, race, and sex” be “presented in contradiction to each other” (100); they must be taken as interlocking parts of the same whole – as Moraga acknowledges with her portrayal of her “sex” as inherently “brown”. No longer can “sex remain the bottom line on which” the Chicana “proves her commitment to her raza” (96); she must be free to commit herself to her *chicanidad* and even to *la familia* while also committing herself to the love of other women. In this way, Moraga destabilizes hegemonic domesticity without rejecting domesticity itself, even celebrating it.

C. “Rethinking of Kinship”: Nelson’s Disidentification with Domesticity

Nelson, though in a different political *and* domestic context than Moraga, also participates in this destabilization-without-rejection: putting pressure on the conception of domesticity as monolithic in favor of a celebration of difference. Nelson’s identities present a challenge to hegemonic and heteronormative domesticity on multiple fronts: as a stepparent, as a queer spouse, and as of the mother of a child whose existence demanded extensive medical intervention. Yet Nelson’s narrative does not constitute a diatribe against the domestic sphere;

conversely, she embraces and elevates domesticity in the form it takes for her personally.

Offering domesticity and queerness as coexistent rather than contradictory, Nelson creates space for coevolution and for the overcoming of perceived conflict. Using the example of a Snapfish mug featuring a family portrait purchased by her mother – and a friend’s response to said mug as the cornucopia of heteronormative-capitalist household paraphernalia – Nelson interrogates what she deems “the presumed opposition of queerness and procreation” (13):

“But what about it is the essence of heteronormativity? ...That my mother made me the mug, in part to indicate that she recognizes and accepts my tribe as family? What about my pregnancy – is that inherently heteronormative? Or, is it the presumed opposition of queerness and procreation (or, to put a finer edge on it, maternity)...” (13).

What is it about the mug that engenders a perception of disturbance? Is it truly, as Nelson’s friend asserts, the proliferation of capitalism as a reinforcement of the heteronormative domestic sphere? Or, as Nelson suggests, the true disturbance is her uncovering of the problematic idea that capitalist domesticity cannot possibly be compatible with queerness. Though a Snapfish mug may not constitute overt political activism, the anecdote nonetheless suggests that Nelson’s non-normative “tribe” may indeed be validated “as family”. Yet to conclude here would be missing Nelson’s point: she argues not for a Snapfish for queers but for a queering of Snapfish (and the domestic institutions it represents). Nelson cites an interview with photographer Catherine Opie that “...becoming homogenized and part of mainstream domesticity is transgressive for somebody like me”, commenting, “it’s the binary of normative/transgressive that’s unsustainable” – that “mainstream domesticity” and transgressive domesticity are not sustainable as separate categories. Thus it is not “mainstream domesticity” that Nelson engages with and celebrates; it is domesticity without a mainstream.

Nelson’s own “pregnancy” poses a fundamental challenge to “the presumed opposition of queerness and...maternity”; however, she leverages her experience not as a success story of

subversion of this binary but instead as a challenge to the binary altogether. As with monolithic conceptions of the domestic sphere, Nelson pressures monolithic conceptions of the body, particularly the gendered body. Detailing her experience with pregnancy, with coexistent “queerness” and “maternity”, Nelson writes:

“Is there something inherently queer about pregnancy itself, insofar as it profoundly alters one’s ‘normal’ state, and occasions a radical intimacy with – and radical alienation from – one’s body?” (13)

Pregnancy in some ways represents a cementation of womanhood and a celebration of the resilience of the female body, yet there is something “inherently queer” about its “profound alteration” of this body. Further, the idea of simultaneous “radical intimacy with – and radical alienation from” resonates with both pregnancy and the experience of trans and gender non-binary individuals such as Nelson’s partner, Harry Dodge. Nelson’s pregnancy coincides with Dodge’s top surgery, a milestone in Dodge’s experience with “radical alienation” from his own body and towards radical acceptance of his changed one. Thus by identifying two separate profound changes in the body as fundamentally queer – and by placing pregnancy, a domestic centerpiece, parallel to gender transition – Nelson rejects monolithic corporeality in favor of the fluidity of the gendered body, in the home and otherwise.

If the Snapfish mug and Nelson’s pregnancy offer examples of personal reconfiguration of queer domesticity, what about such a statement – and its elevation via Nelson’s narrative – renders it *political*? To answer this question, one must situate her words within their sociopolitical context, one expressly featuring a divided public on the issue of state recognition of queer domesticity in the form of marriage. Nelson details a regular sight in California, where she lived while writing *The Argonauts*, as well as during the time in which her own domestic configuration began to fall in place:

“Throughout that fall, yellow YES ON PROP 8 signs were sprouting up everywhere...The sign depicted four stick figures raising their hands to the sky, in a paroxysm of joy – the joy, I suppose, of heteronormativity, here indicated by the fact that one of the stick figures sported a triangle skirt. (*What is that triangle, anyway? My twat?*) PROTECT CALIFORNIA CHILDREN! the stick figures cheered” (11).

Thus with or without explicit intention to do so, Nelson finds herself engaged with the politics of her time – challenging the “joy...of heteronormativity”. Prop 8 (and similar legislation such as the federal Defense of Marriage Act) presented a fundamental referendum on – and ultimate rejection of – queer marriage in the state of California, yet Nelson cements her right to exist in such a political landscape regardless. Her reality may not fit in an artificial representation of fear-mongering stick figures meant to denote the threatened institution of the family (and, in the words of Eileen Myles, “*What is that triangle anyway?*”) – yet she is not barred from the “paroxysm of” domestic “joy”, legislatively or otherwise.

Further, by presenting opposition to the dogma of “PROTECT CALIFORNIA CHILDREN” via her own positive example of child-rearing, Nelson challenges the very basis on which such forced heteronormativity rests. Navigating herself to and through pregnancy with her son Iggy and through the “potentially fraught identity” of “stepparent” (21) to her partner’s son, Nelson illustrates her successful – albeit nontraditional – raising and “protection” of apparently fragile “California children”. Her ability to do so begs the question of *what* the “children” supposedly need protection from: queerness, the Other, any destabilization of the family? Nelson’s experience serves as a counterargument to the idea that her existence as a queer individual threatens any real children or even the idea of “the children” itself. Instead, she argues that the true undercurrent under domestic evolution is not moral depravity but rather a reconstitution of the family – citing Judith Butler, she asks:

“As more queers have kids, will the presumed opposition simply wither away? ...When or how do *new kinship systems mine older nuclear family arrangements* and when or how do

they *radically recontextualize them in a way that constitutes a rethinking of kinship?*” (13-14)

Identifying a forthcoming sociopolitical shift – that which will occur “as more queers have kids” – Nelson underscores the purpose of her work as not just a declaration of her right to the “nuclear family arrangement” but of an impetus for a radical “rethinking of kinship”. Her “new kinship system” offers a counterexample to the stick figures of heteronormativity, a validation of the fluidity of the process of “becoming family” (12), a “revelation of caretaking as detachable from – and attachable to – any gender, any sentient being” (72). Nelson’s domestic role then becomes one not defined by her gender or even by her positionality of mother-stepmother-spouse; she actively *chooses* to stake her claim to the family on the contingent condition that the family will evolve to reflect her place in it as well. Her family, in many ways, becomes her own personal Argo: retaining the name of family but reconstituting itself as fundamentally queer.

Nelson’s invocation and consequent rejection of the “PROTECT CALIFORNIA CHILDREN” imperative recalls a concurrent theoretical movement spurred by Lee Edelman’s work *No Future*. Edelman seeks to interrogate the rhetoric of sociopolitical change as intended to create a better future generation, to proverbially ‘think of the children’ by asking *who* “the children” is meant to include – and exclude. Arguing that society posits “*queerness*” as “the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children’, the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism” (Nelson 75), Edelman takes a polemical stand against collective conception of “the future”. If queerness cannot be compatible with “‘fighting for the children’”, in his estimation, then reproductive futurism is a wholly shortsighted and even erasure-prone sociopolitical framework. Nelson does not wholly reject Edelman’s work, but she also cautions of its extremity as debilitating. She declares, “Reproductive futurism needs no more disciples. But basking in the punk allure of ‘no future’

won't suffice either..." (76) – underscoring the need for a conception of queer futurity that views “the children” not as oppositional to queerness but imbricated with queerness. One must, argues Nelson, continue to fight injustice with an eye towards a future that resists heteronormativity. Thus Nelson chooses disidentification within oppositional constructions of the future: retaining some of the forward-thinking optimism of reproductive futurism while foregrounding its inherent limitations.

D. “Completed and Undone”: Temporality and Textual Pro(Creation)

Citing author Eula Biss, Nelson's text asserts, “*The mother of an adult child sees her work completed and undone at the same time*” (140). Such a model of child rearing as inherently dynamic and contradictory, simultaneously productive and destructive, challenges the traditional linearity of growth and of maternity. In place of the hegemonic narrative of growth from child to adult – treated as two static poles – the oxymoronic term “adult child” signals incompleteness and fluidity. Thus a mother's “work” toward the abstract static point of “adult” becomes fluid as well, as much “completed” as it is “undone”, destabilizing conventional temporality that underlies domestic configurations. Alongside queering of domesticity, queering of temporality also presents a point of departure for a number of theorists. One such work, Elizabeth Freeman's “Time Binds, or Erotohistiography”, identifies queerness' challenge to linearity and to stasis, declaring, “various queer social practices...produce form(s) of time consciousness” (59) that reject – or, at the very least, call into question – linear progression. Deviating from the “official time line” of “events like births, marriages, and deaths” (Freeman 58), queer experiences often center different milestones or reject the basis of milestones in which they may or may not be invited to participate. Thus growth within queer domesticity must inherently be divergent and

fluid, non-linear and perpetually incomplete – and so too, suggests Biss, must be human development more broadly.

Moraga writes as an “adult child” navigating tension with her own mother, whose child-rearing work is respectively “completed” via Moraga’s adulthood and “undone” via their estrangement. Moraga shares her narrative at a point in her life in which she has “completed” her embrace of her Chicana identity and even of her mother, yet also a point in which her sexuality and rejection of gender norms renders *la familia* “undone”. As she articulates, “lesbianism, in any form...challenges the very foundation of la familia” (102). Thus Moraga becomes estranged from the very idea of *la familia* due to her queerness, which her tumultuous relationship with her mother reflects. Nelson also writes as an “adult child” – especially in a text that features her mother somewhat prominently – acutely aware that her own development is “completed and undone at the same time”, allowing her to exist in a space of fluidity at the textual level and beyond. Nelson also writes as a mother, albeit of young children, conscious of the life she has created but also of the constant flux of her role in sustaining this existence. Nelson writes of “...the great soup of being in which we actually live” (53); put differently, she acknowledges and even celebrates fluidity, simultaneity, actuality.

Biss’ insight illuminates Nelson’s and Moraga’s textual production as a whole, if one considers *The Argonauts* as Nelson’s “adult child” and *Loving in the War Years* as Moraga’s. Hybrid literary form is by definition complex and multidimensional, static as words on a page and dynamic as vibrant lived experience, “completed and undone”. As a published literary production, both texts are of course “completed” in one sense; yet their inherent fragmentation enables them to come “undone”, and their personal narratives inevitably continues beyond the borders of the book. As the “mothers” of their “adult children”, their texts, Nelson and Moraga

present final forms that do not purport to cohesiveness. If one considers the reader within this dynamic, subsequent textual analysis and coexistence will almost necessarily dissect their production, forcing it “undone” – thus the idea of “completed and undone at the same time” is pertinent not only to Nelson and Moraga’s hybrid narrative but to literature as a whole. Nelson as mother-of-text and Nelson-as-mother-of-child, along with Moraga’s text-as-child and Moraga-as-child, coexist on the levels of form and content respectively. Thus textual creation and procreation converge as fundamentally fluid and dynamic processes that both authors leverage and interrogate.

As the two authors engage in procreation at both the personal and textual levels, they also invest in the (pro)creation of a new reality, or at least of new ideas of what such a reality should look like. This world is the ultimate manifestation of their political projects, of more fluid understandings of gender, family, sexuality, feminism, and beyond – in one term, of queerness. Kevin Duong deems this orientation toward a better, queerer future “queer world-making” (“What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About Intersectionality?”), defined as such:

“Queer world-making is the making of a commons, itself realizable only through *claims* for a common world that does not yet exist, which is technically unimaginable but nevertheless retained as a possibility by enacting the ‘aspiration to live another way now, here’ (Berlant and Warner 1995, 348)” (379).

Thus such a “queer world” is “realizable only through *claims*”, in a trajectory towards “a common world that does not yet exist” but that could at some unidentified point in the future. Yet the lack of present existence does not diminish the process as “possibility”, as committed orientation toward a reality that accords the queer subject not merely survival but success. Further, Duong underscores the “common” aspect of queer world-making, its investment in “collective *politicized* identity” and “intersectional politics” (372) – put differently, that this project inherently involves a heterogeneous yet similarly-minded community. Moraga and

Nelson constitute part of this community, leveraging their individual and collective narratives toward a “queer world” and with an “aspiration to live another way now, here”.

Conclusion

Thus Moraga and Nelson find a shared critical energy that proves significant not in spite of difference but because of it. The texts find continuity in shared oppression that has endured over time – as Nelson articulates, “...the shared, crushing understanding of what it means to live in a patriarchy” (25). Nelson’s use of the indefinite article “a” rather than the definite “the” gestures to the different manifestations of patriarchy each of these women have encountered: a patriarchy in la *familia* or in mainstream domesticity, a patriarchy in academia, a patriarchy of hegemonic society that constructs barriers to female agency and queer existence. The two women need not “live in” the same patriarchy – the same temporal, social, or political context – to nonetheless generate this “shared...understanding”, one that proves “crushing”, restrictive, and incessant. This concept of reciprocal recognition does not efface uniqueness or particularity; instead, it reinforces solidarity across difference. If Moraga and Nelson can occupy fundamentally different histories and identities yet nonetheless find fundamental similarities of language, this continuity enables a “shared” – albeit multifaceted – queer-feminist consciousness. Further, such a consciousness manifests in genres that are both specific and fluid, which proves appropriate and even necessary to the narratives they encompass.

With this realization, readers might wonder why one would read the texts as isolated in the first place. Why does philosophy – or academia, or political activism – adopt a divide-and-conquer mentality that treats disparate narratives as fundamentally distinct and ignores interconnections? This is not to say the answer to collective liberation lies in white universalizing or erasure of difference; it certainly does not. Yet there is nonetheless inherent value to reading

texts that cross racial, ethnic, sexual, temporal, and spatial boundaries together. As texts like Moraga's and Nelson's find meaning in their own junctures of form and identity, so they find meaning at junctures with one another, junctures of similarity as much as difference. And with shared experience and shared oppression comes shared understanding and shared liberation. It is through reading texts in conversation that we learn not only about each other but also about ourselves. As we study the forms that others take in articulating their politics, we become acutely aware of our forms and our politics, as well as places where this perceived distance between theirs and ours begins to break down. Accordingly, when we encounter form and content with which we disidentify, we move towards radical nuance as we continue to write and to live. Further, when feminists engage with institutional oppression that we share along with that we do not, we move towards radical intersectionality and even radical change.

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