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Supposing (Un)Certainty: Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* and the Queer Essay

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“Did not go where I was knowing” — Caroline Bergvall, *Drift*

Maggie Nelson begins *Bluets* with a supposition: “Suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with a colour” (1). That colour is the titular blue. But I am less interested in the colour than I am in the supposition.

I Google *supposition*: a belief held without proof or certain knowledge; an assumption or hypothesis. I am less concerned with the *assumption* or the *without proof* than I am with *certain knowledge*. I am more interested in how the essay makes space for this, for not this. How the essay makes space for supposition, for a hunch. I have a hunch, I suppose; it might be something to do with trying, thinking, *essaying*.

I start to wonder what the essay is. I go looking for people that may know. I go looking for a *certain knowledge*. I start swimming in words about essays by those with a certain knowledge.

They say / the essay:

- “is a text whose ideal state . . . contests any notion that writing or thinking leads to unity, system, abstraction, mastery” (DuPlessis 40)
- “revolts against the doctrine” or “shys [sic] away from the violence of dogma” (Adorno 158)

- “sanctions failure or refusal to cohere” (Dillon 15).

I start to suppose this: in a sea of hyper-rationality, the essay is a space to explore the possibilities of uncertainty, of supposition. It hovers in entanglements instead of seeking closure or tidy conclusions. It supposes, I begin to suppose. When Nelson says, at the outset, “suppose I shredded my napkin as we spoke” (1), is she putting her *lack of certain knowledge* on display? Is she contesting the notion that we might find unity here? And how manufactured is her not-knowing, her hypothesizing?

*

Suppose I go looking again. *Suppose* I find this:

- writing an essay “comes from curiosity and need — the need to examine opinions and contradictions and to interrogate cultural materials, especially those taken for granted” (DuPlessis 39)
- the essay is “the queer genre,” where both genre and gender are “difficult” or “impossible” to “categorize by normative standards” (Lazar).

Suppose this: as readers we often turn to and praise the essays that do not purport to know, because they allow us to sit with our own uncertainty, with our own “obliquity” (Dillon 14), particularly when these characteristics are increasingly pathologized and marginalized in contemporary social discourse. Suppose this: by inviting uncertainty, the essay also pushes beyond the fetishization of ambiguity and towards something that lies outside of binaries — knowing and not-knowing, categorization and blurring, essentializing and destabilizing. And, in doing so, goes beyond dominant hegemonic discourses and master narratives *in favor of the queer*.

The outlandish. The unorthodox. Other.

*

Suppose the book is about blue, just for now: look at the many potential ideas and lines of inquiry on the color: its connotations (*It's a boy!*), its cultural capital (the sassy bluestocking; Blue Note Records), its aesthetic virtues (Elvis's blue suede shoe). But while the essay — if we are to call *Bluets* that — offers some insights about the color, blue serves mainly as a leaky container for a meditation, that very Montaigne-esque essayistic trait. *Bluets* meanders through facts, ideas, observations, theories, and tales of those most uncertain of human activities: love and loss. Against the backdrop of a poetic rumination on *bleue* — a topic that Nelson is not entirely certain why she is interested in herself — *Bluets* traverses the uncertainties brought about by a tectonic heartbreak and a friend's near-fatal bicycle accident. For her, the color is not just a hue; it is also the feeling of melancholy, couched in the uncertainty of when and if that feeling — brought about by heartbreak, grief, and loss — will ever subside.

Perhaps it is not really about blue at all. What is it about, if it is not about blue? Does it matter *what* it is about? Maybe it is better to ask, '*how* it is about'?

I imagine Nelson reading Wittgenstein in bed. *The meaning is the use*, she whispers to herself before rolling over and turning out the light.

*

In his description of *Bluets*, Thomas Larson compares the shape of the text to a spiral. “To achieve its end,” says Larson, the spiral

must keep moving away from where it began. Its structure is built by pulling away from the core and by keeping attached to the core. The goal (if there is one) is nomadic, a sort of nomadic mosaic. As one reads, despite its progression, the book loses its linearity and feels circular, porous, a tad unstable. (Larson)

- Indeed, the fragmented nature of *Bluets*, while decidedly poetic and rambling, means that the book does not, in Nelson's words, offer “an excuse” or a “solution” (*The Argonauts*

98). Larson might be right; I cannot hold the whole picture here. I cannot comfortably reside.

I talk about the idea of uncertainty at a dinner party. About praising doubt, and how that might help us (live). Something like Keats' negative capability, I guess. Someone tells me I need to read Rosi Braidotti ("you *haven't read* Braidotti?"). I wander around Braidotti for a while and find: Braidotti makes room for a subjectivity in flux, always in the process of becoming, and always intrinsically other. This is her nomad. Her queer.

Suppose then I mention Braidotti's nomad in this essay. A reviewer tells me I cannot mention her without putting Braidotti's ideas in the context of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's nomadology in *A Thousand Plateaus*. They say, *if you're going to mention 'nomad'* . . . I roll my eyes but feel equally compelled by the myth of mastery and propelled by my own self-doubt. I go looking.

I start to suppose that part of my attraction to Nelson's *Bluets* is that it offers a way of thinking that is situated slightly outside of this binary, the binary that says I cannot say anything without quoting someone saying it first. I cannot suppose anything. My argument must be watertight. What is at stake in my argument? Whose side do I take? What evidence can I provide to prove your point? I do not want to write like that, I suppose. I do not want watertight. My thinking is not watertight. It leaks, like me, like my body. I want to be okay with leaking. I want to be like *Bluets*. Suppose I take the recommendation. I retrieve some D and G from the bookshelf, where they have sat, mostly unread, since my idealistic doctoral days. They offer one potential approach to thinking about injunctions of instability in *Bluets*. I learn that the evasive subjectivity of the nomad, in D and G's formulation, mirrors the slipperiness of language in Nelson's essay. But I am not really interested in this linguistic instability. Instead, I am curious about the kind of "porousness" that Larson touches on with his idea of the spiral. About how we move in and out of the text and the

text moves in and out of us and it does not hold or unify or seek to master. I wonder if that permeability is a way of achieving a level of intimacy through relation with an imagined reader.

But maybe it is this porosity that connects us to the queer, to queering.

What might a queer text look like? I leave D and G and go to the queer theorists. I find I am more relaxed, like I have undone my belt and let my tummy fat leak a little.

Teresa de Lauretis proposes that a “queer text” is a literary endeavour that withstands “narrativity,” a certain “closure” or “fulfilment of meaning” (244). It is an act of resistance against homogenized or hegemonic mandates by virtue of being “kaleidoscopic,” “difficult,” and offering neither “solution” nor “resolution” in favour of urging an “excess of affect” (244–245). As de Lauretis has it, the queer text allows for a kind of assertion through uncertainty; it suggests that by remaining open, unresolved or inconclusive, it offers an avenue for thinking beyond “normalizing imperatives” (Dean 161).

On another recommendation from a reader (*you can't talk about queering and Nelson without discussing that book*) I look towards Nelson's wider oeuvre. The book that everyone knows her for, *The Argonauts*, tracks both her own journey into motherhood, and her partner, Harry Dodge's, female to male gender transition. In Nelson's own words, it is a book about the failure to adhere to what she calls “the Aristotelian, perhaps evolutionary need to put everything into categories” (*The Argonauts* 53). I suppose it would likely be the book more closely associated with notions of queering, given that “queer” is — at times more explicitly than others — the underlying subject matter of the book. But I am not interested so much in the politics of queer, or even queer as a subject matter, as *The Argonauts* performs and deals with so well. Rather, what I am circling and spiraling around is the possibility of how queering (as a verb) might open up a domain of talking about the essay, and how this might relate to notions of uncertainty and supposition; how *Bluets*

(and *The Essay* by extension) performs a kind of queering of genre. I want to look beyond the subject matter — the queer as topic for discussion — to the ways in which we might be able to answer de Lauretis's question: "when can literary writing be called queer?" (243). That is, to draw on and expand Lazar's own supposition, that the essay itself, as genre, maintains elements of queerness in and of itself, being "difficult or impossible to characterize," hovering in between our conclusive and tidy notions of genre. "It's not that the essay is unsusceptible to genre 'definition'; it's rather that the nature of the essay asks one to resist categories, and it starts with itself" (DuPlessis 38).

Suppose I go looking for an answer to this question: when can literary writing be called queer? I turn to one of Nelson's go-to's, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. She says:

One of the things that 'queer' can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically. (8)

I tread carefully here; I do not wish to diminish any of the importance and necessity of the ways in which the term "queer" has enabled so many to talk about gender and sexuality. But what interests me here — before Sedgwick's "constituent elements" comes into play — is what she alludes to in the first part of this citation. If we apply Sedgwick's point here to the essay, it suggests that by performing a kind of queerness, the text also lingers in the "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning," inasmuch that it cannot easily be pinned down. It works against essentializing answers and opts instead for supposition.

I go back to Nelson with Sedgwick in my arms. Her "open mesh" haunts and hovers.

I must admit that not all blues thrill me. I am not overly interested in the matte stone of turquoise, for example, and a tepid, faded indigo usually leaves me cold. Sometimes I worry

that if I am not moved by a blue thing, I may be completely despaired, or dead. At times I fake my enthusiasm. At others, I fear I am incapable of communicating the depth of it. (*Bluets* 14)

Suppose this: on a superficial level, there is an affective domain embodied here in the aesthetic descriptions of blue: in the self-exemplifying nature of “a tepid, faded indigo usually leaves me cold,” a chill is already implied in the dullness. Nelson “fears” she will never be able to convey the “depth” of her “enthusiasm,” yet she seems to suggest that in what follows, she will attempt to do just that — “I fell in love with a colour . . . as if falling under a spell” (1). The line “I fear I am incapable of communicating the depth of it,” suggests that what has come before was not a “communication of the depth of it,” and that she may not have what it takes to communicate that depth regardless of having just done precisely that. There is a circularity here that dismantles the intentionality of the statement, making the text “spiral” around itself and, in turn, undermines the notion that a “message” or “meaning” is actually the purpose of the fragment to begin with. The text as circular fragment does not “signify monolithically,” as Sedgwick puts it.

Could this undermining of meaning also be an example of de Lauretis’s suggestion that a queer text “works against narrativity,” and the “fulfilment of meaning” (244)? Nelson is not telling a story or issuing forth conclusive statements. Rather, she is roving, offering suppositions and suggestions that may mean a number of things. The text makes meaning by doing, rather than by saying, and so pushes away from any straightforward referentiality of language. This fragment, like many others in *Bluets*, fails to mean any one thing, and so produces a kind of “excess of affect.” It leaks, resisting “stability” and “categories” in the same way that queer does (Lazar), and rebels against the “airtight order of concepts” or the “closed” and the “deductive” (Adorno 158).

*

Another critic asks me where is the sex, the desire? *You can't write about Nelson without mentioning the clitoris*. The clitoris might be implied on every page, if you went looking for it, I suppose. Another leaky organ.

The idea of *excess* takes on elements of sexualized desire. In talking about the male bowerbird — a logical topic for a book about blue given that it “collects and arranges blue objects” — Nelson says, “When I see photos of [the] blue bowers, I feel so much desire that I wonder if I might have been born into the wrong species” (27). Again, the notion of supposition is evident in the author’s “wondering.” She never claims to know for sure, which further unpicks the normative “fulfilment of meaning.” She also seems to say that she imagines herself as the receiving bowerbird, for whom the bowers have been collected and arranged in order to attract. Yet, by listing off all the items that a male bowerbird might collect — bus tickets, bottle caps, blue feathers, flowers — she also gives the impression of describing herself, as she has explained her own collecting of blue objects in her writing of this book. Again, there is an excess of meaning — she says neither one thing or another, all the while provoking a kind of sexualized tone in which the blue things urge a desire in her. She wants to be other than human so she too can collect, arrange. She supposes it would feel good.

Bluets jumps from one point to another, adhering to a certain porousness of the contemporary and/or queer essay that this (queer?) essay is concerned with. At times a subject continues over several “points,” as in the case of the bowerbirds, which consists of points 67 through to 70 (and “concludes” with “Am I trying, with these ‘propositions,’ to build some kind of bower?” (28)). But for the most part, we move from point to point without ever being entirely sure what the connection is from one to the next. Number 71 reads, for example: “I have been trying, for some time now, to find dignity in my loneliness. I have been finding this hard to do” (28). The text is full of “gaps,” to use Sedgwick’s term, whereby there is no “watertight” argument or resolute

meaning, nor is there a conjecture of a *certain knowledge*. By playing with the prose fragment, Nelson urges the reader to fill in the blanks, the *gaps*; there is no weaving together of a linear narrative, or rounding off of edges to urge readers towards any specific reading. Rather, it is decidedly irresolute, resolutely uncertain.

Suppose another reader comes along. *Historical context*, they say. There are, of course, other ways of talking about the notion of supposition in the essay outside of queering. Postmodernism's fragmentation and deconstruction's unreliability come to mind, as does the polysemy or indeterminacy of the avant-garde, or, in the words of Mark Fisher, a pathologizing of skepticism in current academic circles (16). These are all relevant and would perhaps make for a much more watertight argument elsewhere. However, my feeling is that they are not necessarily sufficient here because they have their beginning in response, in reaction to something that has come before, to which they are either indebted to or rebelling from. On the contrary, the essay as queer text offers a kind of psychoanalytic undoing of the terms that have laid the foundations for our knowledge. To read the essay as queer text is to be, as Sedgwick's quote suggests, open to excess, lapses or gaps, to "transgress the orthodoxy of thought" (Adorno 158), whereas the contrary remains within the negation of the former. That is, to be *uncertain* or to *not* know, where the verbs' construct and root remain in place as opposition. The essay as queer text, however, lets us inhabit a third place, outside of negation and its binary opposite, beyond antonymous push-back. It allows us to hover in the excesses, our gaps, our possibilities. This potentiality is, I suppose, also the site of supposition. The gesture towards knowledge is not foreclosed: the supposition does not pertain to certainty, and so remains undiminished in its possibilities. Like the leaky body. Like the queer text.

*

I would like to pause here. I am not arguing that any form of queerness is equated with an indecisive manner of being-in-the-world. It is not my intention to associate queerness with the kind of derogatory aspect of uncertainty; that by being queer, one does not *know* who one is, for example. Queerness as a term, in this regard, is problematic, as Nelson herself recognizes in an interview:

Queering as a verb has never meant that much to me, especially not these days. Sometimes I might use queer as an adjective, but mostly as a kind of shorthand for a particular scene or vibe. Also, it's a little strange to talk about queering a genre, like memoir, when so many of my favorite books in that genre are already so queer. (qtd. in DeWitt)

Suppose I agree with Nelson here: it is not helpful to speak about queering as a genre. As we know, genres themselves are already problematized as categories which perform acts of closure and fail to recognize the potential for porousness. I am using *queering* here as a verb, yes, but rather than making it function as a verb in a political — sexualized, gendered — debate, I am using it as way to talk about the essay. I suppose that I am arguing this: *a queer essay offers a form of writing that allows for supposition*. That is, I am asking (please?) to borrow the term queer and use it to think about how the essay does not fit neatly into the essential categories of knowing and supposition, of certainty and uncertainty. Rather, it leaks, spills; it queers.

*

Suppose this: *Bluets* queers. It inquires. It is riddled with rhetorical questions and pervaded by self-awareness and doubt. “Suppose” suggests an invitation: *come with me, as I consider the following*. It also signifies an openness, a way of saying *I do not know for sure, but let's think about it (together) for a moment*. This invitation is further exemplified using the collective pronoun in the second sentence, “as *we* spoke” (1). Who is this “we,” given that it is supplanted in the past tense? It could be us, the reader (both singular and plural), or it could be another, who Nelson is herself

talking to. In either case, perhaps even more so in the latter — a private conversation made public — the offer of conversation and consideration is one of openness.

We might then suppose this: Nelson proposes that we, her readers, enter relation with her, signifying that she herself has not decided on an answer to the supposition, making herself vulnerable to her reader from the outset. Imagine if the essay had opened with: “I will begin by saying that I have fallen in love with a color. I say this as though it were a confession; I shred my napkin as we speak.” The message is effectively the same, but it offers nothing of the possibility that comes with the tone of uncertainty. She *may* have fallen in love with a color; we *may* be speaking about it as a confession while she *may* be shredding a napkin. So too, the possibility of “shredding the napkin”: a telltale sign of anxiety in face-to-face dialogue. Again, there is an element of intimacy about this detail; it is the kind of thing that happens during confession, as Nelson infers, and confession is the kind of thing that happens in an intimate space. *Bluets* begins as an intimate conversation, which is the location of relationality and vulnerability, and where thinking happens. The essay offers a space for Nelson to do the thinking, rather than a place to reflect the thinking once it is done.

This performativity is the *modus operandi* for Nelson throughout *Bluets*. The tone is set by the supposition, but the text is littered with verbs like the aforementioned “suppose,” such as “try,” “consider,” or “imagine,” and auxiliary verbs, such as “might,” “ought,” and “could.” The latter play a role in averting any direct assertion, which is further exemplified by the copious amounts of questions that populate the text. As a rhetorical device, the questions are for the reader, while they illustrate something of the elusive position of the writer. They direct our thoughts towards a kind of open inquiry, while also performing something of Nelson’s own uncertainty; the questions offer no gesture of knowingness or resolution. Rather, they point towards possibility, often falling

at the end of the paragraph or answered with a gesture of attempt, rather than assertion: “How could all the shreds of blue garbage bags stuck in brambles, or the bright blue tarps flapping over every shanty and fish stand in the world, be, in essence, the fingerprints of God? *I will try to explain this*” (2).

In an often elusive or uncertain attempt — “I will *try* to explain this” — to answer some of the questions she asks both herself and her readers, Nelson presents the words of another, one who has gone before her and who may seem to know the answer to the questions she is asking herself. The answers come from those she looks to for wisdom, including some literary and cultural greats, like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Billy Holiday, Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery, to name a few. Here she is, questioning notions of excess and originality, and finding an answer in the words of the Buddhist meditation master, Chögyam Trungpa:

Does an album of written thoughts perform a similar displacement, or replacement, of the “original” thoughts themselves? . . . But if writing itself does displace the idea — if it *extrudes* it, as it were, like grinding a lump of wet clay through a hole — where does the excess go? “We don’t want to pollute our world with leftover egos” (Chögyam Trungpa). (*Bluets* 77–8)

This is typical Nelson, avoiding closure of the text with anything that might masquerade as an answer. This excerpt works on an extra-performative level. On the one hand, it defers from any specific answer by placing a quote in lieu of a response to a question. On the other hand, Nelson also manages to avoid inserting her own ego by using the words of someone else to answer her own question. She seems to say that she is incapable of answering or, at the very least, uncertain of what she thinks might be a sufficient answer to the question, thereby displacing the idea that “an album of written thought” — which is what *Bluets* more or less is — performs as “original thoughts.” Instead of these “original thoughts,” she offers a montage of her questions and others’

answers, or others' questions and her almost-answers, effectively refraining from "polluting the world with leftover egos."

The notion of closure is also evaded in the formal characteristics of *Bluets*. The entire text takes the form of fragments, organized into bullet points; each paragraph (which are sometimes as short as a single sentence) is numericized, from 1 through to 240. While on the surface this method of organizing the material might seem like a push towards containment or even essentialism (one equals this, two equals that), they are in fact something of the opposite. Instead, this structure offers Nelson a kind of poetic opening of the text: because they are linear, the numbered paragraphs give off the air of building upon one another. On the contrary, the paragraphs are quite typical of the postmodern essay in that they are, for the most part, fragmentary. Unlike an academic argument or a linear narrative, the essay here plays with how each idea or unit of thought might follow on from each other. The units allow Nelson to dance around, to move freely between ideas, to slip. *Bluets* is, if we take the numbers literally, a list: singular items bound together by the fact of nominalization. The relationship between the items on the list is justified simply by their inclusion, their relationship to the subject as a whole. And the list might also be Nelson paying homage to others: Antonin Artaud, another great list-maker and one of Nelson's many heroes who is present as specter here; Lisa Robertson too, who is "only certain that [she] thinks insofar as [she] reads" (23).

*

Another critic: *you are writing as if Nelson's uncertainty is unintended rather than a considered and crafted element of the work*. I suppose I am projecting; I want to read work by smart women who wrestle with their own uncertainty. I want to know that the essay is a place to do this. I want to see the leaks. I want my leaks to be okay. I want my suppositions to be the place.

*

I suppose I have fallen in love with a book. *Suppose I were to begin*, I whisper to myself before rolling over and turning out the light.

*

But then I see the paradox: in her supposition, Nelson is decidedly resolute — it is something she has, I suppose, consciously cultivated in her work. In this, she effectively tricks me; I have gorged on the uncertainty so abundant in her texts, willfully choosing to ignore the trap because of how it feeds my own proclivity towards self-doubt. However, I have no doubt (I am certain!) that she is, beyond this literary façade, very sure of what she is doing here. This is not to say that she is sure of herself; quite the contrary, if we read the essay biographically. Rather, I suspect she is very sure of her own uncertainty, and of her ability to be with that uncertainty. It is this capacity to remain open, to possibilities, to mistakes — all the while, writing with the lyricism of a very assured writer — that makes *Bluets* such a great example of how the essay can do what the essay does; that is, to essay. It tries. It does not purport to know anything. Like Nelson, *Bluets* is certain of its own entanglement, and in fact takes shape out of its own inconclusiveness.

*

“How to explain,” inquires Nelson, “in a culture frantic for resolution, that sometimes shit stays messy?” (*The Argonauts* 53). It cannot be explained, I suppose. That is, the “messy shit” of life operates outside of the hegemonic norms of knowledge, resolution, and certainty. In “a culture frantic for resolution,” uncertainty is not particularly marketable. Rather, we seem to desire the opposite. As Rebecca Solnit says, there is a “relentless pursuit of certainty and clarity in a world that generally offers neither, a desire to shove nuances and complexities into clear-cut binaries” (53). Solnit calls this trend “naïve cynicism,” and argues that it manifests in the media — whose

inability to say “we do not actually know” something is a product of the 24-hour news cycle and the complete necessity for hyperbole to maintain viewing numbers — and amongst politicians, where “style over substance, attitude over analysis” always triumphs (52–53). Late capitalism will tell us that books need to be, resolutely, *about* something; booksellers need to know where to put them; marketers need to know what label to give them. Nelson’s *Bluets* is about several things, as the publishers tell us: “depression, divinity, alcohol, and desire,” a sort of “pillow book” about the author’s “lifelong obsession with the color blue” (dust jacket). What the publishers do not say, of course, is that Nelson traipses and dances through these subjects with indecision, uncertainty, and a failure to commit to any one point of view in particular. Like poetry, the essay’s uncommercial bedfellow, *Bluets* is essentially unmarketable — it does not fit anywhere. Sound familiar? Yes, like a gender-queer individual, they do not fit either. The same could be said for the essay; it is, in some ways, pre- and post-genre. Or, as Lazar playfully argues, the essay is not “genre-normative.” From Montaigne to Woolf, from Emerson to Nelson (and her place in the crowded field), the essay has always been somewhat queer in that it looks to explore the leaks. The essay, at its best, inhabits the place that Nelson calls “the great soup of being in which we all actually live” (*The Argonauts*, 58). The essay as queer text opens rather than closes; it relates, rather than dictates; it generates rather than defines. And, in doing so, as Adorno suggested, it “transgresses the orthodoxy of thought” (171). I will try to explain this. The essay is not this or that. Suppose it is this *and* that. The essay is *and*.

Hence, I am back where I began. I began where I am hence, back.

Suppose I were to begin by saying.

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