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Write It Slant: Queerness and Form in The Argonauts and Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through

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Write It Slant: Queerness and Form in *The Argonauts* and *Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through*

By

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Abstract

This project analyzes two books of contemporary creative nonfiction: *The Argonauts* by Maggie Nelson (2015) and *Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through* by T Fleischmann (2019). Both writers centrally deal with queerness in their texts as a concept that is ineffable, or unable to be fully explained in words. I explain how to think about queerness as ineffable through the work of queer theorists Judith Butler and José Esteban Muñoz. In their books, Nelson and Fleischmann recognize that language is insufficient or even harmful in maintaining the ineffability of queerness, which poses a significant paradox for their works that are made up of language. I argue that it is in their use of the queer formal elements of non-linearity, blank space, and an incomplete integration of outside texts that Nelson and Fleischmann are able write about queerness beyond the use of language and therefore maintain the concept's ineffability. I acknowledge that both writers are invested in affirming the realness of queer bodies and extending that sense of realness to others and argue that they do so successfully through their use of queer form. By engaging queer theory and conducting a formal analysis of *The Argonauts* and *Time*, I show how queer form can make possible writing about queer content.

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Introduction

I began my voracious reading of creative nonfiction the same summer that I realized my own queerness. Looking back, it's clear to me that this was not a coincidence; I was searching for real lives after which to model my suddenly much more confusing own. I was drawn to books that were formally hard to define, like the queerness that I was beginning to try and fail to articulate. I read books like Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* which blurred the line between fiction and nonfiction, *The Folded Clock* by Heidi Julavits which was structured non-linearly, and *The Lonely City* by Olivia Laing that combines research, history, and memoir into a collection of essays. These books were formally queer in the way that they refused normative memoir structure and evaded strict categorization. However, they had nothing actually to do, on a content level, with queerness.

It not until my lyric essay class in my first year of college that I read a work of creative nonfiction that was not only queer in form, but also content, when my professor assigned Gloria Anzaldúa's remarkable *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987). *Borderlands* profoundly expanded my ideas about queerness and language and awareness of the possibilities in queering form. Anzaldúa writes about queer sexual orientation and gender identity (and much more) through a genre-bending form that incorporates a hybrid mixture of poetry and nonfiction. She draws a link between writing and queerness when she says, "Being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana, or being queer—a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls. Or its opposite: nothing defined or definite, a boundless, floating state of limbo where I kick my heels, brood, percolate, hibernate and wait for something to happen" (94). The queer form of *Borderlands* reflects

the queerness Anzaldúa describes. As she goes back and forth between somewhat straightforward prose and poetry in the text, she renders a sensation of coming up against walls and then floating in a boundless state. Here was a writer who was writing about experiences of nonnormativity within a nonnormative form.

After reading *Borderlands,* I searched for other works of creative nonfiction that dealt with queer sexual orientation and gender identity within a form that reflected the nonnormativity of the content. I searched for books that treated queerness as something more than a static identity marker, as something boundless and necessarily indefinable, since every time I tried to define the queerness I was experiencing, I felt at a loss for the precise words. I found this type of work in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015) and T Fleischmann's *Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through* (2019), the texts with which this paper is centrally concerned. In their works of creative nonfiction, Nelson and Fleischmann deal with queerness as a slippery, ineffable concept and write about it in what I argue is queer form.

Even though Nelson and Fleischmann emphasize the necessarily indefinability of queerness in *The Argonauts* and *Time,* I want to clarify my usages of the term which still maintain the ambiguity of the concept. I have already used queerness in two different ways: to describe sexual orientation and gender identity and also as a way to describe nonnormativity more broadly, in this case as pertaining to literary form. I dive more deeply into the nuances between Nelson and Fleischmann's uses of the term queer in chapter one, but first I will clarify my usages with a quote from Sara Ahmed's 2006 article "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology" in which she holds space for both meanings of queer and articulates the distinction well. Ahmed writes, "I have used

[queer] to describe what is oblique or off-line or just plain wonky. I have also used the term to describe nonstraight sexual practices—in particular lesbianism—as a form of social and sexual contact. I think it is important to retain both meanings of the word queer, which after all are historically related even if irreducible to each other" (565). I read queerness in Nelson and Fleischmann's books both in the nonnormative sexual practices and gender identities they write about as well as the way they resist normative literary forms.

Retaining these two meanings is queer itself, something which Ahmed goes on to explain when she writes:

> "To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things. The effects of such disturbance are uneven, given that the world is already organized around certain forms of living—certain times, spaces, and directions. It is important to make the oblique angles of queer do this work, even if it risks placing different kinds of queer effects alongside each other" (Ahmed 565).

The queer content of *The Argonauts* and *Time* disturbs the order of normative bodies and relationships and the queer form disturbs normative forms. In keeping different types of queerness alongside each other in this project, I allow for an expansiveness of the term that is queer itself in its ambiguity.

In this introduction, I will provide summaries of the two texts, my thesis statement addressing Nelson and Fleischmann's use of queer form to write about queerness, my methodology, and a brief outline of the structure of my project to set up my following close readings of the two texts.

Summaries

The Argonauts (Graywolf Press, 2015) is American poet, nonfiction writer, and scholar Maggie Nelson's most recent book. *The Argonauts* garnered significant attention, becoming a *New York Times* bestseller and winning the 2016 National Book Critics Circle Award in Criticism. In *The Argonauts,* Nelson writes about queerness in a way that is simultaneously expansive and precise, rooted in her own experiences and extensive reading. *The Argonauts* is an amalgamation of deeply personal anecdotes, quotes from philosophers and theorists, and commentary on art, told in the form of short blocks of text, ranging in size from a single line to half a page. The names peppered through the margins credit whom she quotes and give the reader a sense of the breadth of Nelson's cultural and literary touchstones.

The book opens with a graphic description of queer sex between Nelson and her genderfluid partner Harry, whom is a reoccurring presence in the book, establishing the centrality of Harry and queerness to the story. This opening makes clear the highly personal nature of *The Argonauts*, which Nelson also emphasizes when she at times addresses Harry in the second person throughout the book. Harry's comment to Nelson, recorded in *The Argonauts,* that she has not yet written about "the queer part of her life" serves as the impetus for the book. *The Argonauts* deals with queerness in many different ways—it is about Harry's transition, top surgery, and experience on testosterone, Nelson's pregnancy (an experience she frames as queer), the gender dynamics in their relationship and growing family, queer political issues, and the work of queer theorists. The personal elements are not told in linear order in but instead interwoven with the other elements of the book, creating a queer form that I will analyze in this study.

Nelson is self-reflexive about her role as a writer throughout *The Argonauts*, referring to her previous works, speaking engagements, and writing process. She relates these anecdotes back to the central themes of non-normative gender and sexuality. Nelson constantly poses questions, ones which she rarely directly answers but deeply involves through writing about her own experiences and quoting the works of others. Nelson is clearly interested in the contradictions, tensions, and complications that queerness depends upon and explores these both through concrete examples, whether political, personal, or artistic, and complex theory.

I first picked up *Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through* in a bookstore because it reminded me of *The Argonauts,* similarly devoid of chapters, nonnormative in form, and centrally about queer bodies and the relationships between them. Published four years after *The Argonauts* by another small independent publisher, *Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through* (Coffee House Press, 2019) is contemporary American writer and editor T Fleischmann's second book. They have also published both critical and creative work in publications including *The Los Angeles Review of Books, Fourth Genre,* and *Gulf Coast.* Fleischmann is a nonfiction editor at *DIAGRAM* and a contributing editor at *Essay Daily.* According to the book's cover, *Time* (which is how I will refer to it throughout my study) is "an essay," a genre category that Fleischmann expansively uses to mean formally nonnormative creative nonfiction as I will explain further in my third chapter. Compared to *The Argonauts, Time* has more variety in form, with its typical prose paragraphs interrupted by lineated sections, a 15-page long historical story, and five incomplete, floating paragraphs that conclude the book. Each of these sections is distinct, differing from one another both in form and content.

The prose paragraphs in *Time* read as memoir, in which Fleischmann recounts their travels, relationships, and personal experiences. The lineated sections are primarily about Fleischmann's fascination with the late 20th-century visual artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who created minimalist works largely about his queerness and relationship to his partner Ross during the 1980s and 1990s AIDS crisis. Fleischmann also writes about their queer relationship with a person named Simon in these lineated sections. The historical story is a true account of an 18th-century genderqueer person called "the Publick Universal Friend." The five floating paragraphs at the end focus on the subject of ice (as in, the frozen substance), an obsession of Fleischmann's that appears elsewhere in the book. But throughout all of these sections is a consistent thread: a desire to represent nonnormative, queer bodies and the relationships between them. I will draw out these connections throughout my study.

I was drawn to *The Argonauts* and *Time* in part because they both treat queerness expansively. In their texts, authors explicitly express the insufficiency and even the risk of language to fully articulate queerness, something I kept coming up against in the limits of language to articulate my own queerness as well. The writers' recognition of the insufficiency of language particularly compelled me because it raises a paradox, as they both use language to write their books about queerness. While both authors recognize this paradox, neither explicitly explains how they deal with it. This is where my intervention lies. I argue that in their attempts to write about queerness in *The Argonauts* and *Time*, Nelson and Fleischmann recognize the limits of language but write anyway, relying on the queer formal elements of collage—in particular non-linearity, blank space, and the incomplete integration of outside texts—to write indirectly about queerness. Refusing

genre categories and queering the formal elements of their texts also allows the writers to implicitly represent the queer bodies they write about through the form of their books.

Methodology

After I recognized that Nelson and Fleischmann explicitly express the limits of language for writing about queerness in their books made up of language, I asked: what else are texts made up of, besides language, that could allow them to write about the concept anyway? Form is often placed opposite to content, or language, in literary studies, so in this study, I analyze formal elements of *The Argonauts* and *Time* to argue that they allow Nelson and Fleischmann to write about queerness beyond the use of language. I treat content as related to form, but distinct from it. In her 2015 book *Forms*, Caroline Levine explains that she wants to see the gap between content and form dissolve, writing that when we broaden our definitions of form, "The traditionally troubling gap between the form of the literary text and its content and context dissolves" (2). I am also interested in this gap between content and form that Levine identifies, but I don't want to dissolve it. Rather, I want to traverse it, keeping the categories distinct but recognizing their influence on one another. It is useful to keep form and content separate, and it is also useful and very fruitful to see how they inform one another. In the cases of *The Argonauts* and *Time*, the form is able to do things that the content, or language, is not—that is, writing about queerness without attempting to capture its ineffability. Therefore, it is important to keep these categories separate to recognize what they do differently, even though they are related.

Nelson articulates the relationship between content and form in an interview on her writing process, saying, "How the piece eventually takes form is very important, but

form for me comes out of the imperatives of content" ("The 'f-word': fragment and the futility of genre classification"). Nelson expresses that form and content are linked, with the form of a text emerging from what the content demands. A central imperative of content in *The Argonauts* and *Time* is writing about queerness without capturing its ineffability in language. As Nelson recognizes that the words are not "good enough" to write about queerness and Fleischmann expresses a desire to keep their gender and sex life "uninscribed" by language, both writers manipulate form to write about queerness indirectly, slant, or queerly. They both use the collage form and its elements of non-linearity, blank space, and incomplete integration of outside sources to do so. I analyze these elements as queer and emerging out of content's demands to write about queerness without capturing its ineffability.

I analyze *The Argonauts* and *Time* side-by-side, interweaving my readings of the books in each chapter. In many ways, these books seem quite similar—they are both works of creative nonfiction that deal with queerness by using the queer formal elements of non-linearity, blank space, and the integration of outside texts. However, Nelson and Fleischmann each use these three formal elements in distinctly different ways. Nelson and Fleischmann's ideas about queerness differ somewhat, which the formal differences in part illuminate. These differences in ideas about queerness make clear what these writers see as the necessary ineffability and slipperiness of the concept. By comparing them directly, rather than devoting individual chapters to each, the differences in the authors' formal decisions and treatments of queerness become more apparent, drawing out subtleties that I did not notice when initially analyzing them individually.

In order to explain Nelson and Fleischmann's ideas about queerness that make necessary the queering of formal elements, I rely on the work of queer theorists Judith Butler and José Esteban Muñoz. I use Butler and Muñoz's theories to explain that Nelson and Fleischmann treat queerness as ineffable, or unable to be captured in language. Both theorists write about queerness beyond an identity marker for one to claim, and as an expansive concept that necessarily cannot be entirely defined or pinned down, which is how Nelson and Fleischmann do as well. I draw on both Butler's 1993 article "Critically Queer" and the introduction to her 1997 book *Excitable Speech*. In "Critically Queer," Butler writes about the necessity of keeping "queerness" an ever-evolving term that does not mark a strict identity categorization. In *Excitable Speech*, she writes about the power and limits of language more generally and while she doesn't explicitly write about queerness, I apply her ideas about the injurious potential of language on the ineffable to queerness, as she describes the concept as necessarily unable to be captured in "Critically Queer." I also rely on Muñoz's 2009 book *Cruising Utopia* to think about queerness as something that cannot be captured in the present because the concept must always be out of reach. I use Muñoz's ideas to show how Nelson and Fleischmann write about queerness as a concept necessarily out of reach.

In both their content and form, I read *The Argonauts* and *Time* as works of low theory, as proposed by Jack Halberstam in his book *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), in order to illuminate the indirectness, unanswered questions, and amalgamation of sources within them and the ways these elements are emphasized through form. Halberstam describes low theory as "One of these modes of transmission that revels in the detours, twists, and turns through knowing and confusion, and that seeks not to explain but to

involve" (15). Both *The Argonauts* and *Time* seek to involve queerness but not fully explain it, as that would be antithetical to the ineffability of the concept.

They attempt to do so both through the content of their books, but also the form. Low theory is a product of both content and form, as Halberstam also describes it as "knowledge practices that refuse both the form and the content of traditional canons" which "may lead to unbounded form of speculation, modes of thinking that ally not with rigor and order but with inspiration and unpredictability" (Halberstam 10). Both *The Argonauts* and *Time* refuse traditional genre categories, which I will explain further in chapter three. *The Argonauts* is marketed as a "memoir/criticism" but departs from both categories in both its form and content. *Time* is called "an essay" but Fleischmann uses this category to actually resist genre. As I am relying on Ahmed's idea that "to make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things," low theory is particularly queer (565). As Halberstam explains, it is "a counterhegemonic form of theorizing, the theorization of alternatives within an undisciplined zone of knowledge production," therefore disturbing the normative order of theorizing (Halberstam 18). By eschewing genre categories and resisting normative forms, *The Argonauts* and *Time* are works of low theory and thus queer texts.

Reading *Time* and *The Argonauts* as low theory encourages both my clarity and confusion about the books to exist together. As I read *The Argonauts* and *Time,* interviews with the authors, and queer and literary theory, thinking through questions of queerness and form, I had days when I was unbelievably excited about what I was finding followed by days of being absolutely mystified by all of the contradictions. Fleischmann and Nelson seek not to explain queerness in their books, because doing so defeats what

they see as the purpose of the concept. Rather, they involve it, asking questions and posing ideas, allowing for both moments of clarity and confusion. They do so through the "detours, twists, and turns" of their formally non-linear and genre-indefinable books. Reading *The Argonauts* and *Time* as low theory is a particularly queer way of reading if we treat queerness as a concept unable to be captured and defined, as Nelson and Fleischmann do. Low theory reminds me that is the irresolution that make these books queer.

While I don't necessarily claim my project to be a work of low theory because I try not to go off on detours and have structured it like a fairly typical research paper, I kept Halberstam's ideas in mind when I was doing research and drew from a wide variety of sources. For example, I structured my project around lines of a poem by the 19th-century poet Emily Dickinson, included a quote from one of my favorite contemporary creative writers Valeria Luiselli, drew on visual art criticism, and included quotes from interviews published on websites. This allowed me to engage *The Argonauts* and *Time* more fully and akin to how they engage queerness: from a variety of angles and with an open, curious mind.

I have structured my three chapters around the first two lines of a poem by Emily Dickinson: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant — / Success in Circuit Lies," as a tribute to my love for her work. Since most people in my life were shocked that I wasn't writing my I.S. on her, this is my way of still including her in this project. The countless times I've seen this poem quoted it's been interpreted as meaning that we should not tell the entire truth, allowing for fictionalization or things left out. I think this interpretation has merit, but a more interesting reading, and one that I am founding the structure of paper

on, is that it is referring to form. Dickinson begins the poem by advising us to tell the truth "slant." *The Emily Dickinson Lexicon*, which scholars of her work use to get a better sense of how the poet would have understood the words that she uses in her poetry, defines "slant" as "indirectly" ("slant," adv.). I read Dickinson not as advising us on what kind of truth to tell, but rather *how* we should tell the truth—that is, in what *form*. I argue that Nelson and Fleischmann write "slant," or indirectly, about queerness through what I read as queer form, with the help of Sara Ahmed from her article "Orientations." In "Orientations," Ahmed poses the idea that a slant orientation and indirection is specifically queer. She writes that a nonalignment with the normative is "slant" and that this produces a queer effect. In chapter two, I argue that the formal elements of *The Argonauts* and *Time* are queer and thus allow the writers to write about queerness indirectly and beyond the use of language without attempting to capture the concept's ineffability.

Like interpretations of the poem "Tell all the truth," writing and scholarship on creative nonfiction has also largely explored questions of the truth-telling and content of texts rather than their form. In their introduction to *Bending Genre*, Margot Singer and Nicole Walker write that "unfortunately, the fracas over the *ethics* of nonfiction has sidelined important questions of literary *form*" (1). To get a sense of this, I took a cursory look at collections of essays on creative nonfiction. Much of their central concerns are related to truth-telling and ethics, like Singer and Walker suggest. For example, Jen Hirt and Tina Mitchell, editors of *Kept Secret: The Half-Truth in Nonfiction* (2017), explain that the impetus for their collection comes from the fact that "With so many flat-out fraudulent memoirs getting attention, there is a need for transparency behind the process

of how we tell our truths" (xvii). And in the introduction to the anthology *We Might As Well Call It The Lyric Essay* (2015), John D'Agata remembers that when he wrote a book that "suggested that some kind of essays don't always need to be verifiably accurate," it proved to be much more controversial than he expected, as he writes that he was "shocked by some people's reactions" (7). He describes people's responses, writing, "If it's called 'nonfiction,' many colleagues insisted, then it needs to report the facts as accurately as the news" (8). Of course, truth is what purportedly serves as the foundation for nonfiction, but it is easy to get sidetracked in debating the truth of a piece and ignore analyzing its form. My project shows that interesting discoveries that can be made when we turn our focus to the form of works of creative nonfiction.

Chapters

In chapter one, "Tell all the truth," I show that Nelson and Fleischmann's central concern in their books is writing about queerness. This chapter focuses on the content of the books—specifically, the writers' frustrations and struggles in attempting to write about queerness. I use the theory of Butler and Muñoz to frame how Nelson and Fleischmann understand queerness as an ineffable concept, rather than solely as a fixed identity term. Nelson and Fleischmann are explicitly averse to using "queer" as a way to identify themselves since it codifies the concept which they, alongside Butler and Muñoz, believe is antithetical queerness. They still engage the concept throughout their texts, however, in terms of politics, nonnormative bodies and relationships, and something that can never be precisely pinned down. Even though Nelson and Fleischmann write extensively about queerness, they both recognize the limits of language in attempting to write about it. I argue that this raises a significant challenge for both writers who use

language to write their books. I conclude chapter one with the question: how are Nelson and Fleischmann able to write about queerness without fully relying on language and attempting to capture the concept's ineffability?

In chapter two, "But tell it slant—," I argue that Nelson and Fleischmann use "slant" formal elements to write indirectly about queerness without. Using Ahmed's argument from "Orientations," I argue that writing "slant" is writing in a queer form. I read *The Argonauts* and *Time* as examples of collage form. Collage form's elements of non-linearity, blank space, and incomplete integration of outside texts are particularly queer in the way they disrupt normative form. In this chapter, I provide a close reading of both writers' uses of each of these formal elements. I include images of pages to provide a visual for the formal elements. I show how Nelson and Fleischmann manipulate form in different ways but to the same end of representing queerness beyond the use of language.

In chapter three, "Success in Circuit Lies," I recognize that both Nelson and Fleischmann express an investment in representing the "realness" of queer bodily experience in their books. I return to the work of Butler who argues that sometimes language can be the tool for affirming one's realness, especially for queer bodies. I note that this raises another paradox for Nelson and Fleischmann who wrestle with the insufficiency of language in expressing queerness. I introduce writing on queer abstract art to think about the possibilities in form for invoking the queer body beyond the use of language. Ultimately in this chapter, I argue that is through their queer form that refuses genre categories and is non-linear that Nelson and Fleischmann are able to invoke the bodies they want to affirm. Finally, I recognize that Nelson and Fleischmann's investments in realness are coupled with a desire to extend that sense of realness to others

that is an act of queer collectivity. I again turn to the formal elements of particularly non-linearity and the incomplete integration of outside texts that I analyzed in chapter two to show how they invite the reader into their texts and achieve their goal of extending a queer, collective sense of realness to others.

This project underscores the importance of examining the role that formal elements play in a text. Nelson and Fleischmann are able to write about queerness beyond the use of language and thus deal with a significant paradox for their books by queering the formal elements of their texts. By paying attention to the form, an underexamined element in analyses of creative nonfiction, we can more deeply appreciate the complexities of the content. For *The Argonauts* and *Time,* queer form is necessary in order to write about what the texts are centrally concerned with—queerness as an ineffable concept unable to be fully dealt with in language.

Chapter I: "Tell all the truth"

One of my favorite things about creative nonfiction is that it doesn't have to be clearly *about* anything in particular, or it can be about many things at once. However, in this chapter, "Tell all the truth," I attend to what both Maggie Nelson and T Fleischmann suggest their books to centrally be about, the truth that they attempt to tell in their works of creative nonfiction. In both cases, the content does not compromise what I love about creative nonfiction, but rather supports it. Both Nelson and Fleischmann write centrally about queerness, a concept that they frame as ineffable, or impossible to capture in language. Thus, what their books are about is thus still somewhat ambiguous and unable to be precisely articulated.

Nelson is explicit about queerness being central to *The Argonauts*, whereas Fleischmann avoids using the term to describe what they write about in *Time*. However, I argue that Fleischmann still writes about queerness as it is articulated by queer theorists Judith Butler and José Esteban Muñoz who describe queerness as unable to be pinned down or captured. I use the theory of Butler and Muñoz to frame both Nelson and Fleischmann's treatments of queerness as ineffable. Both theorists express the political implications of keeping queerness out of reach, which Nelson and Fleischmann address as well. Finally, I argue that keeping queerness ineffable presents a challenge for people working in language as Nelson and Fleischmann are. In their books, both writers recognize the insufficiency of language to write about queerness, but they nonetheless write these books that are centrally about the concept. I see this as a significant paradox for their books and conclude with the question I will attempt to answer in chapter two:

How, then, do Nelson and Fleischmann write these books about queerness without attempting to capture the concept's ineffability?

The Centrality of Queerness

Queerness is central to both *The Argonauts* and *Time.* Nelson presents *The Argonauts* as her attempt to respond to her partner Harry's accusation that "*You've written about all the parts of your life except this, except the queer part*" (32). The "queer part" of Nelson's life, as it turns out, is many parts: her relationship to Harry, but also her pregnancy, her philosophical and theoretical readings, her analyses of art, and her politics. Nelson positions *The Argonauts* as the text which responses to Harry's claim and deals with all of these queer parts of her life.

Fleischmann is less explicit about the central focus of *Time,* but it seems to be queerness according to what they write at the end of their book. They write that this story is "a story of bodies that are different, of people who fuck up and make each other happy and then die" (144). Throughout *Time,* they write about nonnormative relationships and bodies in a way that I read as queer according to Muñoz's theory.

For both Nelson and Fleischmann, queerness is about nonnormative bodies and the relationships between them rather than individual identity. Queer theorists Butler and Muñoz also frame queerness as markedly indicating things beyond identity. According to Butler and Muñoz, queerness must be held ineffable and unable to be captured by language in the present in order to maintain this broad meaning beyond identity.

Queerness Beyond Identity

The term "queer" began to be reclaimed in the early 1990s to describe not specifically a gender or sexual identity but nonnormativity more broadly. As David Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz outline in their introduction to *What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?* (2005):

> "Around 1990, *queer* emerged into public consciousness. It was a term that challenged the normalizing mechanisms of state power to name its sexual subjects: male or female, married or single, heterosexual or homosexual, natural or perverse. Given its commitment to interrogating the social processes that not only produced and recognized but also normalized and sustained identity, the political promise of the term resided specifically in its broad critique of multiple social antagonisms, including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, in addition to sexuality" (1).

Queerness as imagined in the 1990s was expansive and used to interrogate social process rather than be solely claimed as an identity. Looking back on the 1990s in her 2004 article "Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin," Susan Stryker describes the "new concept of an antiessentialist, postidentitarian, strategically fluid 'queerness'" (213). This iteration of queerness was necessarily not tied to identity and had ever-shifting meaning.

It was during this time that Judith Butler wrote her article "Critically Queer" (1993) in which she argues that the ineffability of queerness must be maintained for the concept to maintain its usefulness. Butler writes:

> "If the term 'queer' is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and future-oriented imagining, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes" (19).

Butler explains that using "queer" as an identity category can risk compromising the queerness that she outlines, writing that it is "impossible to sustain that kind of mastery over the trajectory of those categories within discourse. This is not an argument against using identity categories, but it is a reminder of the risk that attends every such use" (19). For Butler, queerness must be able to constantly change and develop, which identity categories risk hindering.

Nelson and Fleischmann both avoid using queerness as an identity term in order to maintain its usage for historical reflection and future-oriented political purposes that Butler refers to. Nelson elucidates her decision to not use "queer" as an identifier for herself in an interview with Fleischmann on the website *Essay Daily*. When Fleischmann asks Nelson, "In terms of gender and sexuality, do you think of yourself as a queer writer, or of your work as somehow queer?" Nelson responds, "I'm very invested in queer literary genealogy/genealogies, which I would be very happy for my work to be seen as a part of, more so than I care about the (self)-designation 'queer writer,' as the latter seems to beg biographical questions and introduce codified notions of what qualifies as queer to which I've always felt allergic" ("Queer Essay Interviews: Maggie Nelson"). Though Nelson sees value in using the word "queer" to describe such things as literary genealogies that are historically related to others and greater than the individual, the uses

that Butler recommends, she believes that the word becomes codified when used to indicate individual identity. This codification, Nelson seems to suggest, is antithetical to what queerness should be, in accordance with queer theory's original framing of the concept from the 1990s. To Nelson and these theorists, queerness is useful when it is being used to describe nonnormativity broadly, but not strictly identity. In *The Argonauts,* Nelson wants to avoid codifying queerness, which means that she tries to avoid directly capturing what the concept means.

In *Time,* Fleischmann suggests that the ineffability and postidentarian nature of queerness that Butler and the other theorists outline first drew them to the concept. Fleischmann explains their aversion to the term when it is used to describe identity when they write, "Queerness, when I first encountered the idea, aspired to a life away from identity categories, eroticizing what lies outside them, but today it seems the word often points to a reification of identity, to new rules" (65). Fleischmann explicitly decides to not use queer as an identity term for themselves, writing in *Time*, "I am not queer these days" (23). For Fleischmann, identifying as queer would reify queerness, which is antithetical to their understanding of the concept as something ineffable. Unlike Nelson, Fleischmann does not use the term "queerness" to describe anything other than identity throughout their book, but I will argue that they are often still writing about queerness as imagined by Butler and particularly Muñoz.

In his 2009 book *Cruising Utopia,* Muñoz expands upon Butler's argument that queerness should be kept "never fully owned" in the present with his theory of the "horizon" as the location of queerness. He also argues that queerness is not a static category that one can embody, writing that queerness is "not yet here" and that "we have

never been queer" right on the very first page of his book which speaks to Nelson and Fleischmann's aversions to using "queer" as an identity marker (1). Muñoz describes queerness as something that is necessarily always out of reach, arguing that "if queerness is to have any value whatsoever, it must be viewed as being visible only in the horizon" (11). Queerness, in Muñoz's terms, cannot be pinned down and captured in the present.

Muñoz situates queerness as something that we are always moving towards but can never quite reach, as he writes, "we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward" (1). In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz is ultimately offering a theory of queer futurity as he proposes that queerness is "primarily about futurity and hope" (11). Muñoz describes his theory of queer futurity as being "attentive to the past for the purposes of critiquing a present" (18). Muñoz thus ascribes a political usefulness to queer futurity in its ability to critique the present order of things. As I will explain shortly, Nelson and Fleischmann explore the political usefulness of keeping queerness as something unable to be captured and situated in the future. While an analysis of the role of queer futurity in *The Argonauts* and *Time* is worth another entire I.S. project, recognizing that both writers write about queerness as something that we move towards but can never quite capture is most helpful for this study. The idea of queer futurity will be present throughout this project but is not currently my central concern.

"You never get there, you just keep going"

In line with Butler and Muñoz, Nelson and Fleischmann treat queerness as something which cannot be captured in the present. While Nelson provides specific examples for things that she deems as "queer," she uses the term capaciously which

makes it unable to fully be captured. Fleischmann writes about queerness in queer theory's terms as something that is out of reach but avoids using the term explicitly. By writing about queerness as a concept that we can move towards but can never quite reach, Nelson and Fleischmann speak to Butler and Muñoz's theories of the concept and treat queerness as necessarily ineffable.

The closest we get to a direct statement of Nelson's understanding of queerness is in her presentation of the work of queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Sedgwick's description of queerness is how Nelson also deals with the concept throughout *The Argonauts*. Nelson explains Sedgwick's work by writing:

> "Sedgwick wanted to make way for 'queer' to hold all kinds of resistances and fracturings and mismatches that have little or nothing to do with sexual orientation. 'Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurring, eddying, *troublant*,' she wrote…At the same time, Sedgwick argued that 'given the historical and contemporary force of the prohibitions against *every* same-sex sexual expression, for anyone to disavow those meanings, or to displace them from the term [*queer*]'s definitional center, would be to dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself'" (29).

Sedgwick simultaneously wants queerness to have little to do with sexual orientation and to be centered around it. Queerness has significant meaning rooted in sexual expression and orientation that must not be lost, but it can also be used applied more expansively to nonnormativity that is not related to sexuality. This very breadth of the concept is queer in its allowance of paradox. Nelson finds Sedgwick's ideas compelling as she comments, "In other words, she wanted it both ways. There is much to be learned from wanting

something both ways" (29). By framing queerness as "a continuing movement," Sedgwick speaks to Muñoz's language and articulates the concept as something that is constantly moving but never quite able to be captured, a framing that Nelson embraces. In the quote from "Orientations" that I used in my introduction, Ahmed describes the importance of allowing for both uses of "queer" when she writes, "Although we risk losing the specificity of queer as a commitment to a life of sexual deviation, we would also sustain the significance of deviation in what makes queer lives queer" (565). It is queer to allow for paradox and contradiction, which these multiple uses of queerness do.

In *The Argonauts,* Nelson herself uses the concept of queerness in the two ways Sedgwick outlines. For example, when Nelson writes about a 2012 photo exhibition by A. L. Steiner called *Puppies and Babies* featuring photographs of the artist's friends holding, unsurprisingly, puppies and babies, she argues that some of the subjects "may not identify as queer, but it doesn't matter. The installation queers them," not as a presentation of sexual orientation, but rather through nonnormativity (72). In this example, Nelson uses queerness to refer more widely to nonnormativity rather than merely identity, "redeploying, twisting, and queering" the term, to use Butler's phrasing. However, later in the book, Nelson writes that "queerness is about disturbing normative sexual assumptions and practices," maintaining the centrality of sexual orientation to queerness, even though she also applies it to things, like Steiner's exhibition, that have little do with it (111). Nelson's ambivalence towards queerness makes her usage of the concept impossible to precisely pin down. Queerness in *The Argonauts* cannot be fully contained or defined, "not fully owned in the present" as Butler recommends it to be, but rather something on "the horizon" that Muñoz orients us towards.

Fleischmann's treatment of queerness is different from Nelson's because they largely avoid using the term "queer" in *Time,* only mentioning it as a codified marker of identity that they do not use for themselves. Though they do not explicitly explain this decision, I understand it in the context of their introduction to the 2014 interview collection *Body Forms.* Fleischmann asks:

> "If queerness is exciting for resisting identity, and if the essay is exciting because of its hybridity, its way of slipping among genres, would the natural conclusion of these lines of thought be the extinction of both? Could I just not identity—a gender, a sexuality, a genre, a body of a self or a text?" (vi-vii).

I will return to their paralleling of the essay and queerness in chapter three, but here I want to focus on what they are saying about queerness. The queerness that they are interested in resists describing identity, in line with Butler and Muñoz's framings of the concept. However, while Fleischmann expects that queerness would subsequently go "extinct" in its resistance to identity, Butler argues that it can be constantly reimagined and Muñoz that it is always just out of reach but constantly something we are moving towards. In *Time,* Fleischmann implies that they think queerness has gone extinct by only mentioning the term when describing identity, but I read the ways that they write about nonnormative bodies, relationships, and politics as queer in particularly Muñoz's theorizing of the concept as always out of reach and on the horizon. I argue that Fleischmann still writes about queerness even though they do not indicate it as such.

For example, at the end of *Time,* Fleischmann uses language that resonates closely with Muñoz's theory of queerness, as they vaguely begin a paragraph by writing, "Anyway, you never get there, you just keep going" (143). This idea of constantly

moving towards something but never quite getting there is in line with Muñoz's framing of queerness as something always out of reach and in the future. I read the "there" that Fleischmann refers to as queerness since a paragraph later they write:

> "I'm always catching myself in a daydream, / where Simon and I are holding hands, and going exactly / where we should be. / Because that's what I dream of, places like that. / Where Simon likes holding hands / and everyone recognizes our collective beauty, / a thing that is here now but also very far from what we know" (144).

The "there" that Fleischmann imagines constantly moving towards is this idyllic queer relationship with Simon in the future. By framing this queer relationship as something very far away in the future that they are moving towards, this scene resonates with Muñoz's theory of queerness always being on the horizon.

One reason why Butler and Muñoz argue it is important to maintain queerness as something ineffable and out of reach is because doing so maintains the political potential of the concept, something that Nelson and Fleischmann both engage in their texts as well. I refer to politics to mean actions that have material consequences on lived experiences, based on how the theorists and Nelson and Fleischmann write about politics. Nelson writes about queer politics from a more removed, theoretical standpoint, whereas Fleischmann writes about the ways that they themselves engage in queer politics. However, both writers suggest that keeping queerness as something unable to be captured gives it the political power that Muñoz and Butler describe the concept as having.

Butler writes that keeping queerness as something never owned in the present allows the concept to work "in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes" ("Critically Queer" 19). Muñoz provides more precise language for what the political purpose of queerness is. He writes that keeping queerness as untouched "potentially staves off the ossifying effects of neoliberal ideology and the degradation of politics brought about by representations of queerness in contemporary popular culture" (22). Neoliberalism and degraded politics are things of the present, which Muñoz believes a queer orientation toward the future can imagine us beyond. Neoliberalism's lack of political conviction is, according to Muñoz, in opposition to the inherent political strength of queerness. Nelson and Fleischmann both implicitly express anti-neoliberal politics.

Queer theorist Lisa Duggan explains what the "neoliberal ideology and the degradation of politics" that Muñoz believes queerness works against in her 2002 article "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism." Duggan defines neoliberalism as "a kind of nonpolitics—a way of being reasonable and of promoting universally desirable forms of economic expansion and democratic government globally" (177). More specifically, neoliberalism is "procorporate, 'free market,' anti-'big government' rhetoric shaping U.S. policy and dominating international financial institutions since the early 1980s" which is nonpolitical in its "way of being reasonable and of promoting universally desirable forms of economic expansion and democratic government globally" (177). It is the dominating state of the present order of things, which Muñoz wants queerness to work against in its propelling towards a better future.

While neoliberalism is embraced by many identity groups, Duggan is primarily interested in its perpetuation by gay constituencies and culture forming "the new

homonormativity," which she defines as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (179). Duggan argues that gay people who perpetuate heteronormative institutions rather than critique them constitute this homonormativity. Two major heteronormative institutions that are upheld by homonormativity, according to Duggan, are marriage and the military, both of which Nelson and Fleischmann wrestle with in their books, in addition to other forms of domination that queerness can work politically against if kept ineffable and within Butler and Muñoz's terms.

Nelson writes that queerness has political potential in opposition to homonormative institutions. However, she also recognizes that this potential power is constantly threatened. Nelson emphasizes the complexity of the relationship of queerness to state institutions in the significant length of her sentence when she writes:

> "There's something truly strange about living in a historical moment in which the conservative anxiety and despair about queers bringing down civilization and its institutions (marriage, most notably) is met by the anxiety and despair so many queers feel about the failure or incapacity of queerness to bring down civilization and its institutions, and their frustration with the assimilationist, unthinkingly neoliberal bent of the mainstream GLBTQ+ movement, which has spent fine coin begging entrance into two historically repressive structures: marriage and the military" (26).

Nelson keeps the "GLBTQ+ movement" separate from "the queers," claiming that the former is assimilationist and neoliberal and critiqued by the latter. The GLBTQ+ movement promotes the homonormativity that Duggan writes about and that Muñoz and Butler warn against. Nelson recognizes the challenges that queerness faces in attempting to take down homonormative, neoliberal institutions, but by keeping these two groups distinct, Nelson suggests that queerness is still "not here," as per Muñoz. Despite the challenge of taking down these institutions, Nelson still sees value in queerness, adding, "This is not a devaluation of queerness. It is a reminder: if we want to do more than claw our way into repressive structures, we have our work cut out for us" (26). Nelson believes that queerness has political power, but also that this power has to be maintained through hard, collective work as suggested by the first-person collective use of "we."

In *Time,* Fleischmann writes about their investment in the potential of queerness to take down state institutions. They are more direct and radical in their politics than Nelson and provide examples for what the political queerness that Nelson alludes to might look like in action. Though they do not explicitly describe their politics as queer, I argue that they are through Muñoz's terms. Their anti-state stance and actions read as particularly queer when they write:

> "The police state wants me dead to make sure their children don't end up like me, so I guess every time I fuck and I'm happy and I do what I want I would like to call that an anti-state action. The people I love alive—yes, we weaken the state. But also every time after I have felt pleasure and played pool with a bunch of transsexuals and smoked weed and then eaten a taco and gone home, when my body is at its best, then I need to set myself to contributing to the coalition, which

> is already underway, which has kept me alive, the work of liberation being one of the ceaseless things" (138).

I read Fleischmann's "work of liberation" as queer liberation as it is related to their desire to have sex with whom they want, feel pleasure with other people, and embrace their nonnormative body. As I will explain further in chapter three, Fleischmann is invested in affirming the realness of queer bodies in their work, which their emphasis on feeling pleasure and sensory experience in this passage does. Fleischmann shows how feeling bodily pleasure can be political for queer people whose bodies have been erased and discriminated against by institutions including the state. The anti-state liberation they write about is queer in Muñoz's terms as Fleischmann describes it as "ceaseless," like Muñoz's framing of queerness as something which constantly propels us forward towards something better but necessarily must never quite reach it.

Language's Relationship to the Ineffable

It is in their writing that Nelson and Fleischmann engage queerness. This presents a paradox because language risks attempting to capture and injure the ineffability of queerness that the writers suggest is necessary to maintain for their queer political beliefs. In *Excitable Speech,* Judith Butler works with Toni Morrison's 1993 Nobel Prize speech to argue that language can be injurious when it tries to capture the meaning of the ineffable. In her speech, Morrison said, "Language can never live up to life once and for all. Nor should it. Language can never "pin down" slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable." Morrison then puts this in different words, going on to state, "Language arcs toward the place where meaning may lie," but never quite reaches it. Butler responds to

this by explaining that in its attempt to capture the ineffable, language can be violent. She explains that the potential violence of language "consists in its effort to capture the ineffable and, hence, to destroy it, to seize hold of that which must remain elusive for language to operate as a living thing" (9). Morrison explains that language can never quite capture the ineffable, and Butler takes this a step further by arguing that when language tries to do so, it can have a violent effect.

While neither Morrison nor Butler writes specifically here about queerness as something which language attempts to capture, I apply their ideas to the concept because Nelson and Fleischmann treat it as necessarily ineffable as per Muñoz and Butler in "Critically Queer." Nelson and Fleischmann characterize the language that attempts to capture queerness as more negative or uncomfortable than violent and injurious. Morrison and Butler's ideas, however, still offer a framework through which to understand the negative potential of language on ineffable concepts such as queerness.

Nelson immediately begins *The Argonauts* by grappling with writing about queerness through language. The first paragraph of the book depicts a sex scene with Harry, setting up the book as about queerness. The second paragraph then moves backwards in time, with Nelson explaining that "before we met, I had spent a lifetime devoted to Wittgenstein's idea that the inexpressible is contained—inexpressibly—in the expressed" (3). Nelson is highly interested in the work of the early 20th century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. She was particularly taken with his idea pertaining to language that it is "possible to express truths that cannot in some sense or other be said" (Lugg 248). Nelson simplifies Wittgenstein's theory to the statement that "Words are good enough," meaning that language can, paradoxically, capture even that which is

indescribable (3). This theory stands, notably, in contrast to Butler's point that language becomes violent and destroys what it is trying to explain when it attempts to capture the inexpressible.

It is after entering a relationship with Harry that Nelson's conviction that "words are good enough" is challenged. Harry, Nelson writes, "spent a lifetime equally devoted to the conviction that words are *not* good enough. Not only not good enough, but corrosive to all that is good, all that is real, all that is flow" (4). Nelson explains why Harry believes this, writing that he thinks that once something is named, "we can never see it in the same way again," which is something he knew "not from shunning language, but from immersion in it, on the screen, in conversation, onstage, on the page" (4). Harry's opinion is closer to Butler's, who argues that language is injurious to life when it attempts to capture it, which it often does. The couple argues passionately over their differing opinions on the impact of language because both Nelson and Harry believe that language is significant.

Though she initially passionately resists Harry's conviction, Nelson begins to see the merit in it when she is tasked with booking airline reservations for herself and Harry and negotiating with human resources—dealings that bring up questions about Harry's gender and the couple's relationship. Nelson writes, "I'm ashamed for (or simply pissed at) the person who keeps making all the wrong presumptions and has to be corrected, but who can't be corrected because the words are not good enough" to explain her relationship to Harry and his gender identity (7). This comment is seemingly minor and could be easily explained by the point that airlines and human resources departments, particularly in the mid-2000s, don't have the language for queerness. However, Nelson

uses these examples to illustrate that it was particularly in moments in her relationship with Harry that her conviction that words are enough to describe the inexpressible—in this case queerness—was challenged. She emphasizes the gravity of this realization by repeating it and following with a free-standing line in italics: "*How can the words not be good enough?*" (7). In the context of her queer relationship with Harry, Nelson realizes that words are unable to entirely capture queerness which is in opposition to her longstanding conviction that language can express even that which cannot be expressed. Queerness, Nelson realizes, is something that language cannot and should not entirely express in order to maintain the ineffability of the concept.

In *Time,* Fleischmann also recognizes the insufficiency of words to identify their gender and sexuality, writing about the negative effect that identity categories for gender and sexuality have had on them. Their current solution is to not identify with any words at all, as they write:

> "It took me years to consider the fact that I did not have to name my gender or sexuality at all so that now I must always tell people that I am not something. I insist on this absence more, even, than I used to insist on my identities, that I was a bisexual boy, or genderqueer, or a queer, which was actually just unpleasant for me in a lot of ways, come to realize" (64).

In attempting to find language to describe their gender and sexuality, Fleischmann realized that their identity is ineffable, unable to be captured in words. Using language to describe their gender and sexuality was unpleasant for them. Nelson addresses this phenomenon as well when she writes, "Some people find pleasure in aligning themselves with an identity…But there can also be a horror in doing so, not to mention an

impossibility" (Nelson 14-15). Nelson's use of the word "horror" recalls the injurious power of language that Butler references, extending it to naming gender and sexuality. Attempting to capture identity that is ineffable in language can be harmful, and also just simply impossible, as it has been for Fleischmann when trying to describe their gender and sexuality.

Fleischmann's realization that words are not good enough to identify their gender and sexuality causes them to want to avoid using any words at all to describe themselves. To introduce their insistence upon describing their gender and sexual identity as an absence, Fleischmann writes, "I want to leave my gender and my sex life uninscribed" (64). They then describe their desire to avoid language when more generally expressing themselves, again using the word "uninscribed," when they write, "I would like to be uninscribed by language, like an uninscribed piece of paper" (64). However, Fleischmann uses language to write about their gender and sex life, and more generally about themselves, in *Time,* posing a significant paradox for the book.

Significance

Nelson and Fleischmann's realizations of the inadequacy of language to express queerness poses significant challenges for writing books about queerness. Nelson's realization that "the words are not enough" is of such gravity to her because Wittgenstein's theory that the words *are* enough is, as she explains, "*why I write,* or how I feel able to keep writing" (3). Wittgenstein's theory allows Nelson to accept that all that is inexpressible is contained in the expressed and therefore continue to write, as she explains, "It doesn't feed or exalt any angst one may feel about the incapacity to express, in words, that which eludes them" (3). Based on Nelson's reasoning for why she writes,

the logical conclusion would be that she would no longer be able to write after realizing that the inexpressible is not always contained in the expressed. This is particularly salient for *The Argonauts* as queerness, and particularly Nelson's relationship to Harry, ground the text—which is what she realizes words are not good enough to describe. But she writes the book anyway.

Fleischmann raises a similar paradox in *Time*: they write that they want to be uninscribed by language, but they write this story about themselves using language. They begin to recognize this contradiction when they write, "I am of course still written into this whole structure, I can't escape the language," but then say, "that won't stop me from refusing it anyway" (Fleischmann 65). While they do explore the possibility of refusing language in incorporating an entirely blank page in their book, which I analyze in my next chapter, *Time* is largely proof that they haven't refused language but are rather actively engaging it.

In *The Argonauts* and *Time*, Nelson and Fleischmann want to maintain queerness as an ineffable concept, as something that cannot entirely be captured in language, as Butler and Muñoz describe it. In their texts, the writers recognize that language can harmfully attempt to capture queerness and that it is insufficient for writing about the concept. However, they both use language to write their books. This raises a question: How do Nelson and Fleischmann write about queerness without capturing its ineffability that they want to maintain?

Chapter II: "But tell it slant—"

If writers are people who deal in language, and words are not enough or even injurious for Maggie Nelson and T Fleischmann when writing about queerness, then how do they still write their books about queerness? When Emily Dickinson advises us to "tell all the truth" in her poem, she adds "but tell it slant." As I mentioned in the introduction, *The Emily Dickinson Lexicon* defines "slant" as "indirectly." Nelson and Fleischmann must write indirectly about queerness in order to avoid attempting to injuriously capture the concept's ineffability. Writing "slant," or indirectly, is a specifically queer method, as Sara Ahmed suggests in her "Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology" (2013). In this chapter, I rely on Ahmed's argument that indirection, or a "slant" orientation, is queer to show how Nelson and Fleischmann queer elements of form to write about queerness beyond the use of language.

In this chapter, I argue that Nelson and Fleischmann use collage form in their books, a form that I argue "slants" or "queers," what they are trying to write about, allowing the writers to write about queerness indirectly without capturing its ineffability. In particular, I analyze three queer formal elements that Nelson and Fleischmann use: non-linearity, blank space, and incomplete integration of outside texts. In comparing the ways the writers manipulate these formal elements, I discover that they use the elements in very different ways but for the same purpose of writing about queerness beyond the use of language. Recognizing the differences in the writers' use of formal elements further illuminates the nuances in their thoughts on queerness that I outlined in chapter one. Being aware of the writers' differences in thought is important because it makes clear that queerness is a concept that is necessarily expansive and unable to be fully

captured, which is how both Nelson and Fleischmann frame it. For example, Nelson's use of blank space is consistent and regular, whereas Fleischmann's is varied. This difference reflects Nelson's more explicit ideas about queerness relative to Fleischmann's more subtle ones. Both writers, however, use queer formal elements to communicate the irresolution and indirectness necessary for writing about queerness while maintaining its ineffability.

I read the queer formal elements of *The Argonauts* and *Time* as part of what makes these texts works of Jack Halberstam's low theory. In this chapter, I show how Nelson and Fleischmann's works "refuse the form" of "traditional canons," as Halberstam explains low theory does (10). *The Argonauts* is, according to the back cover, marketed as a "memoir/criticism" and *Time* is called "an essay." I will further explore the way these books eschew these genre categories in the third chapter, but the labels serve as a helpful starting point to understand the normative forms that the books divert from. Memoirs are typically linear, chronologically following the story of a person's life or a period from it. Essays tend to follow the linear arc of an argument. Typical memoirs and essays are written in prose with full paragraphs. Finally, if a memoir or essay includes outside sources, they will be fully cited in a works cited or footnotes. *The Argonauts* and *Time* divert from each of these normative formal elements, which makes them formally queer. This refusal of traditional forms to produce low theory is queer in that it is "a counterhegemonic form of theorizing, the theorization of alternatives within an undisciplined zone of knowledge production" (Halberstam 18). Reading these texts as low theory illuminates the queerness of their form and the writers' ability to write about queerness beyond the use of language and therefore without capturing its ineffability.

Taking seriously the form of *The Argonauts* and *Time* is important because the writers purposefully formal elements to make it possible to write the content of their books. The writers' use of queer form is a way of dealing with the paradox of continuing to write about queerness without capturing its ineffability in language.

Queer Form

Sara Ahmed uses the word "slant" to describe a "queer," or "oblique" orientation in space, words that she uses interchangeably. To Ahmed, the slant is moving out of a straight line, something which she argues is particularly queer, explaining, "What intrigues me here is not so much how sex, gender, and sexual orientation can get out of line, which they certainly can and do, but how they are kept in line, often through force, such that any nonalignment produces a queer effect" (557). I read this forceful keeping-in-line that Ahmed describes as normativity which any deviation from is queer. The queer nonalignment with the normative to Ahmed is "slant," or "oblique." In *The Argonauts* and *Time,* the queer formal elements of non-linearity, blank space, and the incomplete integration of outside texts become unaligned with normative forms, which allows the writers to express queerness beyond the use of language.

In "Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social," Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez describe queer form as "the range of formal, aesthetic, and sensuous strategies that make difference a little *less* knowable, visible, and digestible," emphasizing the "value of indirection, opacity, and withholding as queer strategies" (235). In *The Argonauts* and *Time,* queer formal elements allow the writers to write indirectly and incompletely about queerness in order to avoid capturing the concept's ineffability. Building on these writers and Ahmed, I read "slant" form as both

unaligned with the normative and also embracing indirectness, which the formal elements of *The Argonauts* and *Time* do. Nelson and Fleischmann write both books non-linearly, deviating from the normative linear structure of memoirs. They use blank space between paragraphs more frequently than normative texts, and Fleischmann uses it to lineate sections that break out of a typical prose format. Both writers also integrate outside sources in their texts but provide incomplete and nonnormative citations for them. In queering the form of their texts through non-linearity, blank space, and incomplete integration of outside texts in their collage forms, Nelson and Fleischmann emphasize the unknowability necessary to represent queerness while maintaining its ineffability.

Collage Form

I read *The Argonauts* and *Time* as working in the collage form, which is particularly conducive to low theory and the queering of form. While the origin of collage lies in visual art, its invention attributed to the artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque in the 20th century, the collage form has since been applied to literary and musical forms as well (Cran 1). In her 2016 book *Collage in Twentieth-Century Art, Literature, and Culture,* Rona Cran analyzes the work of a visual artist, a novelist, a poet, and a songwriter all as collage which opens up the possibility of analyzing *The Argonauts* and *Time* as works of collage as well, in the form of books.

Cran writes that the basic principle of the collage is "Experimentation with and the linking of disparate phenomena: democratically, arbitrarily, and even unintentionally" (Cran 4). *The Argonauts* and *Time* are constructed from disparate, non-linear chunks of texts and excerpts from a wide variety of outside sources. These disparate pieces come together to form a central characteristic of collage: the notion of a "present absence," "of

figuring a figure that is never quite there" (Cran 4). In this way, collage is a way of maintaining the ineffability of a concept. In collage, "the absence of the origin is necessary, in that it facilitates or enables that from which it is absent, and reinforces the concept that the artist is avoiding direct representation of an object or idea, but that this object or idea exists nonetheless and is important in its unrepresentability" (Cran 4). In *The Argonauts* and *Time*, that which is unrepresentable is queerness, and collage is the form through which both Nelson and Fleischmann are able to write about the concept without directly representing it through language.

In this chapter, I conduct a close reading of three formal elements that Nelson and Fleischmann employ to create collage form to write indirectly about queerness: non-linearity, blank space, and incomplete integration of outside texts. I argue that each of these elements is queer in that it "slants," or indirectly represents, queerness for which words are insufficient to write about. I read non-linearity as queer temporality, blank space as representing the holes necessary for writing about the ineffability of queerness, and the incomplete integration of texts as raising questions that queerly remain unanswered.

Non-linearity

Nelson and Fleischmann use the fragmented nature of the collage form to write their books in a non-linear, queer temporality. Queer theorists have written extensively about the queerness of non-linear temporality. In *In A Queer Time and Place* (2005), Halberstam writes about queer time as counter to the heteronormative, progressive timeline of life, explaining that "Queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (1). In

"Orientations," Ahmed further describes the "straight time" that Halberstam argues queer time is an opposition to, writing that straight time "means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. Such points accumulate, creating the impression of a straight line. To follow such a line might be a way to become straight, by not deviating at any point" (554). A deviation from this line would be a "slanting," or queering. By writing their books non-linearly, Nelson and Fleischmann queer the temporality of their texts. The queer, non-linear form allows the writers to represent queerness in their books beyond the use of language.

In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz argues that queerness deviates from the straight line of a progressive, heteronormative life when he writes, "Queerness's time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time" (25). I read non-linearity as an element of low theory, since Halberstam describes low theory as a method of investigation "that revels in the detours, twists, and turns through knowing and confusion, and that seeks not to explain but to involve" (15). This desire to not fully explain things, to follow detours, and to step out of the straight, progressive narrative, is a queer one that Nelson and Fleischmann use in their books. *The Argonauts* is immediately and starkly non-linear, while *Time*'s non-linearity is more subtle. By writing in non-linear forms, Nelson and Fleischmann create a queer temporality and depict queerness beyond merely the use of words.

Many critics have noticed and written about the obvious non-linearity of *The Argonauts*. The book opens with the time stamp of "October, 2007," when Nelson and a friend are having lunch, a scene which seamlessly flows into a sex scene with Harry that is then immediately followed in the next paragraph with Nelson's thoughts before she met Harry (Nelson 3). While the opening timestamp initially orients the reader, it in fact

serves as a point from which to deviate from a linear narrative as Nelson immediately takes us out of October 2007. This non-linear temporality continues throughout the book. For example, Nelson includes stories of her child Iggy as a baby before the scene of his birth that appears at the very end of the book. She also writes about dating Harry long after their marriage scene. While Nelson writes about starting a family and reproducing, markers of "straight time," the way she formally constructs this narrative in *The Argonauts* is queer, placing these markers out of order to emphasize the queerness of her experience.

In *Time,* the narrative told in the more typical prose form of the text is arguably fairly linear, tracking Fleischmann's travels and relationships as they unfold over time. However, this narrative is frequently interrupted by the lineated sections of the text, the personal narrative element of which take place in a period of time before the rest of the book. Fleischman brings the readers back and forth from the present to the past over the course of the book through these formal shifts, deviating from a straight, linear narrative. This allows them to communicate the queerness of their experiences through the book's form.

By writing non-linearly, Nelson and Fleischmann represent queerness through the temporal form of their books which is queer itself. According to Halberstam and Muñoz, non-linearity is a form of queer temporality as it is in opposition to "straight time." While *The Argonauts* is marketed as memoiristic, a genre which typically follows the linear arc of a life story, Nelson writes about her life experiences non-linearly, which queers the text. Fleischmann also queers their text that is posited as an essay by deviating from what would be expected to be a linear argument by inserting stories and scenes from the past in

the typical prose text that dominates the book. In both books, the writers express queerness through the non-linear temporality of their texts, using this formal element to express queerness beyond the use of language.

Blank Space

Another striking formal element of both *The Argonauts* and *Time* is the writers' capacious use of blank space. A formal element easily overlooked, blank space can add significant meaning to a text, in addition to language. In her 2010 book of short essays *Sidewalks,* Valeria Luiselli presents an alternative way of understanding of the writer, not merely as someone who deals in words, but as "a person who distributes silences and empty spaces" (78). A writer can deliberately manipulate the blank spaces in a text, whether through lineation, breaks between sections, or entirely blank pages, to a variety of different ends. Blank spaces can have the effect of creating pauses, representing the unexplainable, or shaping the text into a particular formal shape, among many other uses, all of which add to a reader's understanding of a work beyond its words. Luiselli's claim addresses both content and form; the "silences" in a text are that which goes unsaid and the "empty spaces" are the physical blank spots on the page.

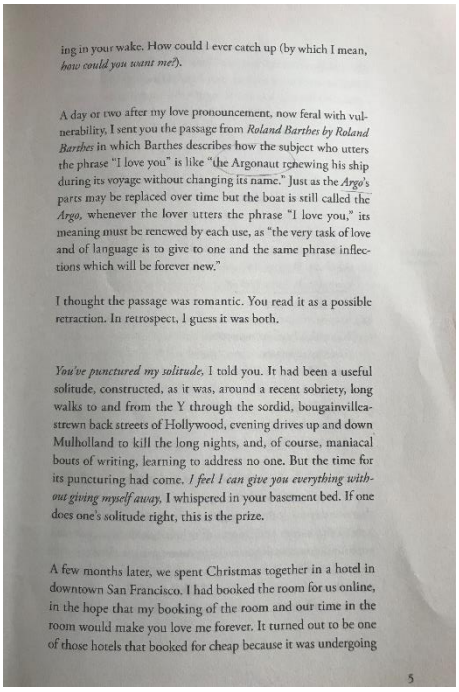
Both Nelson and Fleischmann actively use blank space in their texts to indicate the queerness which they cannot or do not want to write about solely in language. For example, the chunks of text in *The Argonauts* are separated by blank spaces and there are sections of *Time* that are lineated with blank space. The blank space in these texts "slants" or queers the content by allowing for irresolution. Though Nelson and Fleischmann use blank space to the same end—representing the ineffability of queerness and writing queerly—formally, they construct it differently. Nelson's blank spaces are

regular and consistent, whereas Fleischmann's are varied. Analyzing both Nelson and Fleischmann's uses of blank space illuminates their differences in the way they write about queerness but also how the formal element works to the same end of maintaining the concept's ineffability.

Nelson and Fleischmann's use of blank space in *The Argonauts* and *Time* is another way these texts are works of low theory and thus able to allow for the irresolution necessary to write about queerness. Halberstam writes that low theory allows for "more undisciplined knowledge, more questions and fewer answers" (10). Blank space in *The Argonauts* and *Time* emphasizes the unanswerability of questions about queerness and therefore maintains the concept's ineffability. In her essay "It Is What It Is," Eula Biss describes how blank space can do this, writing, "Holes in an essay, I tell my students, flaws in the logic, contradictions, unanswered questions, loose associations may all be necessary because of what they ultimately make possible" (197). Biss is referring to holes in content, but these holes are reflected, in *The Argonauts* and *Time,* in formal blank space. What do the holes in *The Argonauts* and *Time* make possible for the books? Both formal holes—blank space that lacks words—and content holes—"flaws in logic"—in *The Argonauts* and *Time* make it possible for their authors to write about queerness without capturing its ineffability.

The entirety of *The Argonauts* is made up of chunks of writing that vary in length from a single line to half a page. These blocks are separated from one another by blank spaces which also vary in size throughout the book. Sometimes it is only a line's worth of space that separates two blocks of text, sometimes it is multiple lines worth. These spaces

represent and allow for the holes in the language of writing about queerness and allow for an indirectness that is necessary for writing in queer form.



ing in your wake. How could I ever catch up (by which I mean, *how could you want me?*).

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

I thought the passage was romantic. You read it as a possible retraction. In retrospect, I guess it was both.

You've punctured my solitude, I told you. It had been a useful solitude, constructed, as it was, around a recent sobriety, long walks to and from the Y through the sordid, bougainvillea-strewn back streets of Hollywood, evening drives up and down Mulholland to kill the long nights, and, of course, maniacal bouts of writing, learning to address no one. But the time for its puncturing had come. *I feel I can give you everything without giving myself away,* I whispered in your basement bed. If one does one's solitude right, this is the prize.

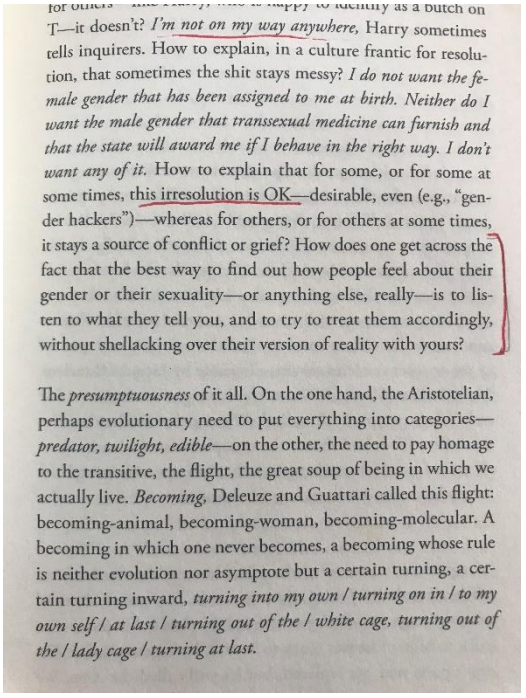
A few months later, we spent Christmas together in a hotel in downtown San Francisco. I had booked the room for us online, in the hope that my booking of the room and our time in the room would make you love me forever. It turned out to be one of those hotels that booked for cheap because it was undergoing

5

On the first page of the book, when Nelson explains her devotion to Wittgenstein's idea that "Words are good enough," she remarks, "*It is idle to fault a net for having holes,* my encyclopedia notes" (3). It's an odd moment; though there are no full citations for any of the quotations in the book, it's left particularly vague what encyclopedia this is or what entry this quote is from. The quote itself is also fairly opaque. By being placed at this point in the text, it immediately seems that Nelson is trying to emphasize Wittgenstein's point that even the inexpressible is contained in language. She suggests that we shouldn't regard language as "not enough" even if it contains holes, with a focus on the net that continues to hold it together. Of course, a few pages later, she comes to the realization that words are not always enough, but the

quotation still holds. It is still idle to find fault in the holes because they are interesting and necessary openings that also help to make the net.

The frequent and irregularly sized spaces between blocks of text in *The Argonauts* serve as holes in both the form and content that are held together by a complex and intricate net of ideas. In *The Argonauts*, Nelson is both literally and figuratively making space for the realization that words are not enough, particularly in writing about queerness. In the majority of her discussion about queerness, Nelson raises questions and paradoxes that she does not set out to answer or resolve, making her text a work of low theory in its allowance of irresolution. Nelson emphasizes the unanswerability of these questions by inserting blank spaces after them. After a strange conversation at a dinner party, she wonders a string of questions: "Was Harry a woman? Was I straight lady? What did past relationships I'd had with 'other women' have in common with this one? ... Why was this woman, whom I barely knew, talking to me like this? When would Harry come back from the bathroom?" (8). Language is not enough to answer these questions about queerness, which Nelson underscores by inserting blank spaces after them. She involves these questions but does not explain them, like Halberstam explains low theory does in that it "seeks not to explain but to involve" (15). The blank spaces are queer in that they allow for irresolution and emphasize the unanswerability of the questions she asks about queerness.



for others—like Harry, who is happy to identify as a butch on T—it doesn't? *I'm not on my way anywhere,* Harry sometimes tells inquirers. How to explain, in a culture frantic for resolution, that sometimes the shit stays messy? *I do not want the female gender that has been assigned to me at birth. Neither do I want the male gender that transsexual medicine can furnish and that the state will award me if I behave in the right way. I don't want any of it.* How to explain that for some, or for some at some times, this irresolution is OK—desirable, even (e.g., "gender hackers")—whereas for others, or for others at some times, it stays a source of conflict or grief? How does one get across the fact that the best way to find out how people feel about their gender or their sexuality—or anything else, really—is to listen to what they tell you, and to try to treat them accordingly, without shellacking over their version of reality with yours?

The *presumptuousness* of it all. On the one hand, the Aristotelian, perhaps evolutionary need to put everything into categories—*predator, twilight, edible*—on the other, the need to pay homage to the transitive, the flight, the great soup of being in which we actually live. *Becoming,* Deleuze and Guattari called this flight: becoming-animal, becoming-woman, becoming-molecular. A becoming in which one never becomes, a becoming whose rule is neither evolution nor asymptote but a certain turning, a certain turning inward, *turning into my own / turning on in / to my own self / at last / turning out of the / white cage, turning out of the / lady cage / turning at last.*

Nelson makes this same formal move of inserting a blank space after asking questions about queerness multiple other times. After researching the discriminatory policy on queer students at a university at which she was asked to speak, she asks, "What kind of 'queer' is this?" (28). And on thinking about her own creativity she writes, "I wonder if one might be creative (or queer, or happy, or held) *in spite of* oneself" (103). She inserts a blank space after both of these wonderings, leaving them unresolved and emphasizing the irresolution necessary when asking questions about queerness. Nelson addresses the usefulness and necessity of leaving discussions of queerness unresolved, 7asking, "How to explain, in a culture frantic for resolution, that sometimes the shit stays messy?...How to explain that for some, or for some at some times, this irresolution is OK—desirable even…?" (53). Like her other questions about queerness, Nelson does not answer this one, maintaining the usefulness of irresolution. It is through her use of blank

space after her questions that she emphasizes the necessary lack of answers when writing about queerness and in a queer form.

The blank space in *Time* also queers, or slants, the form of the book, allowing Fleischmann to write about queerness indirectly, but it is much more varied than the blank space in *The Argonauts.* Fleischmann uses blank space in a variety of ways including to lineate sections, as an entire page, and surrounding incomplete paragraphs. All of these uses work to the same end of writing about queerness beyond the use of language.

Fleischmann explicitly addresses the usefulness and queer potentiality they see in blankness through their interest in the artwork *"Untitled" (Passport)* by the queer visual artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, a piece that I read as an example of a queer aesthetic form (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Gonzalez-Torres, Felix. *"Untitled" (Passport)*, 1991. Marieluise Hessel Collection on permanent loan to the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York.

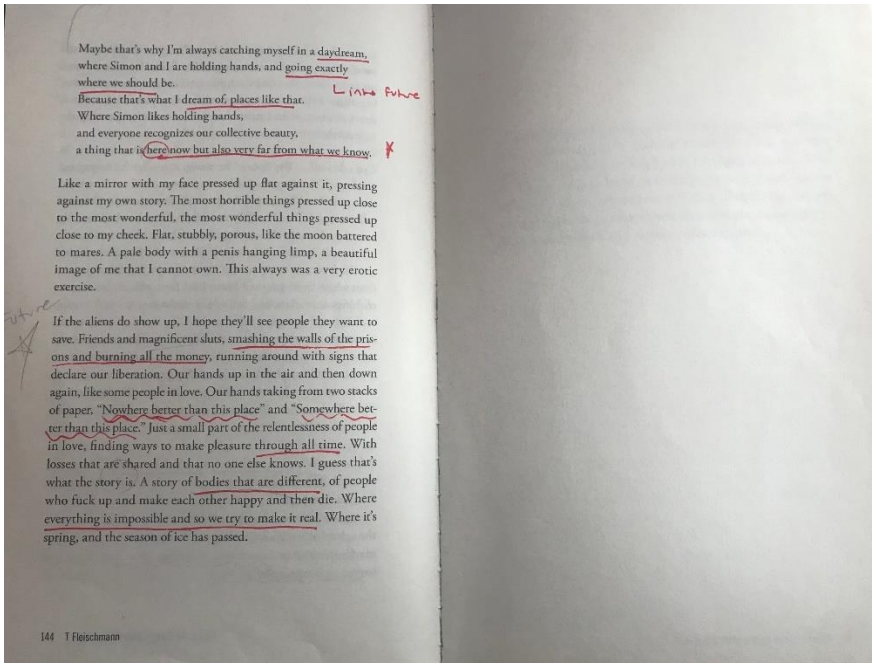
The piece is a stack of blank white sheets of paper that are approximately 23 by 23 inches. Museum visitors are encouraged to take from the stack the piece is on display.

Fleischmann's use of "uninscribed" to describe how they want to keep their gender and sex life ineffable comes from the language Gonzalez-Torres uses to describe *"Untitled" (Passport)* in a 1992 letter to his gallerist in which the artist speaks to the usefulness in blankness. Fleischmann quotes the letter in *Time*, when they write that Gonzalez-Torres "reflected on another one of his takeaway pieces, a stack from which you can take an 'uninscribed piece of paper' which he called *"Untitled" (Passport)*. In the letter, he considers the blank paper a source of beautiful possibility, 'an untouched feeling'" (63). I read the blankness of this piece as queer in Muñoz's terms. While Muñoz mentions *"Untitled" (Passport)* as an example of a queer aesthetic form in *Cruising Utopia*, I wish to use his theory to expand on his example.

On the first page of *Cruising Utopia,* Muñoz writes, "Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing" (1). By being entirely blank, the papers in *"Untitled" (Passport)* give the effect of suggesting that something is missing within them. Muñoz posits the feeling of something missing as queer in that it rejects the present world and suggests movement towards another. This is how Fleischmann interprets the blankness of the *"Untitled" (Passport)* when they write, "The uninscribed, like Gonzalez-Torres says, is a site of change" (64). Blankness suggests endless possibilities for change. The blankness of the sheets of paper in *"Untitled" (Passport)* is queer in its suggestion that there is something missing and that there is a possibility of moving towards change.

When discussing their resistance to the word "queer" to describe their identity, Fleischmann alludes to Gonzalez-Torres's piece, writing, "I would like to be uninscribed by language, like an uninscribed piece of paper" (64). Fleischmann sees queer value in

the blankness of *"Untitled" (Passport)* in refusing language and employs blankness as a formal element in *Time* to maintain the ineffability of queerness beyond the use of language. Most notably, Fleischmann includes an entirely blank page, front and back, on pages 146 and 147. Though a blank page could easily be overlooked or merely regarded as a transition marker, Fleischmann's explicit interest in Gonzalez-Torres's uninscribed page draws attention to this page. I recognize it as a purposefully queer formal element that represents the impossibility of writing about queerness merely through words, particularly in light of the queer potential Fleischmann sees in Gonzalez-Torres's blank page.



Maybe that's why I'm always catching myself in a daydream, where Simon and I are holding hands, and going exactly where we should be.
Because that's what I dream of, places like that.
Where Simon likes holding hands,
and everyone recognizes our collective beauty,
a thing that is here now but also very far from what we know.

Like a mirror with my face pressed up flat against it, pressing against my own story. The most horrible things pressed up close to the most wonderful, the most wonderful things pressed up close to my cheek. Flat, stubbly, porous, like the moon battered to mares. A pale body with a penis hanging limp, a beautiful image of me that I cannot own. This always was a very erotic exercise.

If the aliens do show up, I hope they'll see people they want to save. Friends and magnificent sluts, smashing the walls of the prisons and burning all the money, running around with signs that declare our liberation. Our hands up in the air and then down again, like some people in love. Our hands taking from two stacks of paper. "Nowhere better than this place" and "Somewhere better than this place." Just a small part of the relentlessness of people in love, finding ways to make pleasure through all time. With losses that are shared and that no one else knows. I guess that's what the story is. A story of bodies that are different, of people who fuck up and make each other happy and then die. Where everything is impossible and so we try to make it real. Where it's spring, and the season of ice has passed.

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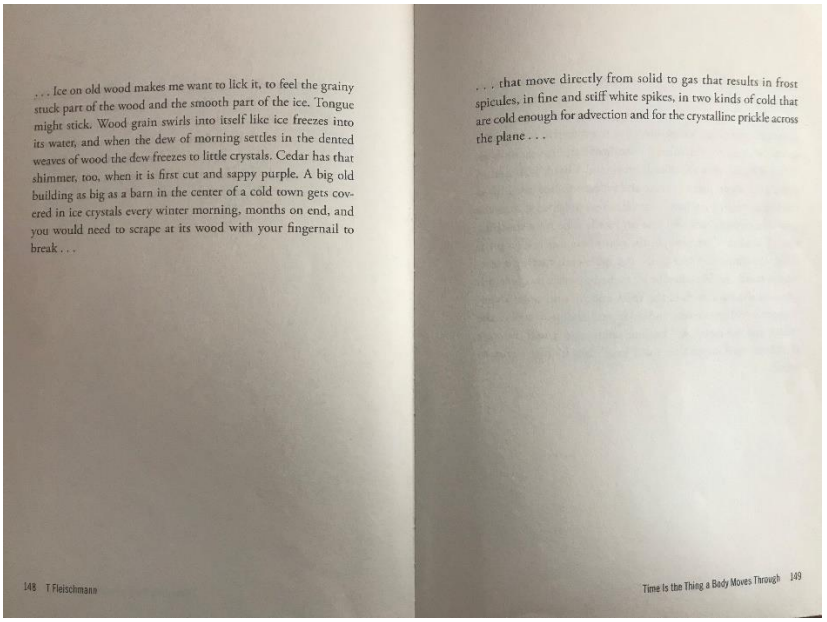
The blank page in *Time* follows the final paragraph of the prose section, in which Fleischmann writes that the story is "a story of bodies that are different, of people who fuck up and make each other happy and then die. Where everything is impossible and so we try to make it real. Where it's spring, and the season of ice has passed" (144).

Fleischmann suggests that these lines lend themselves to be followed by words, as earlier in *Time* they write about a project they are working on "about Felix Gonzalez-Torres, ice, and sex. Its opening line is, 'It is spring, and the season of ice has passed,'" which also serves as the final line of the paragraph before the blank page (40). By following this repeated line at the end of *Time* with a blank page, Fleischmann suggests the possibility of a book without words as perhaps the only way to sufficiently capture the impossibility of writing about queerness and identity.

What follows this blank page is five pages on the topic of ice, in which Fleischmann introduces another use of blank space. Each page contains a floating paragraph framed by ellipses that do not feed directly into one another and are thus incomplete, inserting blank spaces both between the paragraphs and above and below them. The form Fleischmann uses to write about ice emphasizes the difficulty of describing the substance in words. Like their recognition of the impossibility of language for capturing queerness, Fleischman writes that they also "can't fix in language" the beauty of ice (29). I read ice in *Time* as an analogy to queerness, subtle evidence for which appears throughout the text. Fleischmann's use of blank space to write about ice emphasizes the necessity of also using blank space to write about gender and sexuality.



. . . Ice on old wood makes me want to lick it, to feel the grainy stuck part of the wood and the smooth part of the ice. Tongue might stick. Wood grain swirls into itself like ice freezes into its water, and when the dew of morning settles in the dented weaves of wood the dew freezes to little crystals. Cedar has that shimmer, too, when it is first cut and sappy purple. A big old building as big as a barn in the center of a cold town gets covered in ice crystals every winter morning, months on end, and you would need to scrape at its wood with your fingernail to break . . .

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. . . that move directly from solid to gas that results in frost spicules, in fine and stiff white spikes, in two kinds of cold that are cold enough for advection and for the crystalline prickle across the plane . . .

Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through 149

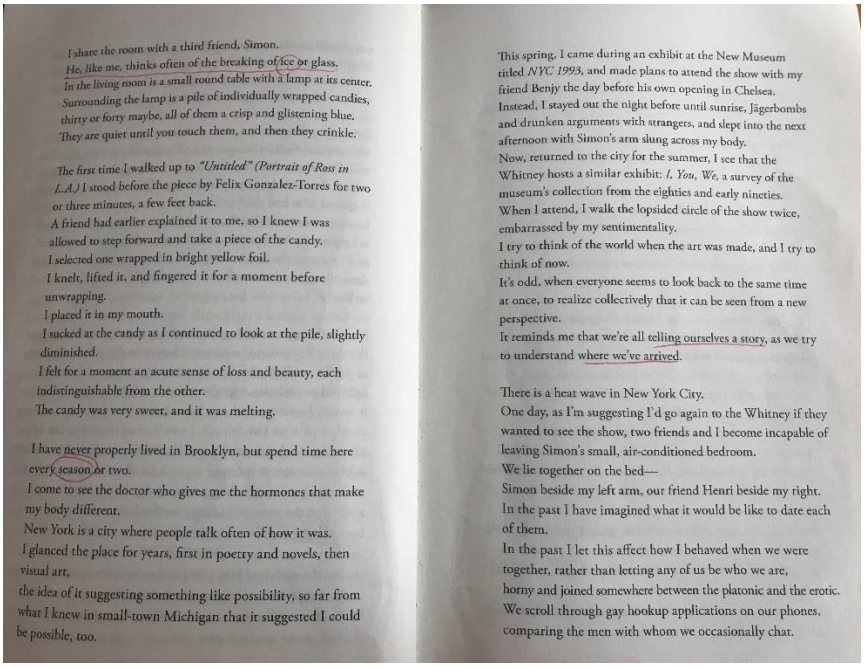
Content and form reflect one another in the way Fleischmann writes about ice. At the beginning of *Time,* they explain that for a period of time they wrote about ice every day and that "Getting close to ice made it easier to get my prose close to ice" (20). They would observe ice closely and attempt to write about it in a form that reflected what they saw, an attempt illustrated in the final five pages of *Time*. They describe the unstable form of ice as "a disarray of fissures and air," something that moves "directly from solid to gas," and is "split with tendrils of crack" (147, 149, and 150). By writing about ice in paragraphs that have no definitive start or finish and are surrounded by blank space, Fleischmann emphasizes the instability in fissures and cracks of the ice they describe. The form of these final pages also emphasizes the insufficiency of language in being able to entirely capture the ice.

Fleischmann subtly draws the connection between ice and queerness and the difficulty of capturing both in language multiple times in *Time*. While sitting next to Lake Michigan, trying to capture in their writing the way ice operates, Fleischmann writes,

"The lake does not conform to my expectations of motion or fit its shapes to the rise and fall of temperature" (89). These descriptions suggest incompletion and the difficulty of capturing this substance in words that is reflected in the incomplete and indefinable form of the final pages about ice. Fleischmann's description of the ice on Lake Michigan echoes their thoughts on their own transitioning body, when they write, "I can't tell whether I am conforming to fill a shape or drawing its boundaries" (9). They use the words "conform" and "shape" to write about both ice and their transitioning body, thereby drawing a connection between the two and furthering the analogy of ice to queerness. Fleischmann more explicitly connects ice to queerness when they equate it to their queer relationship with a person named Simon, telling him, "'You know that I'm talking about you when I talk about the ice'" (32). Though this is the only explicit mention in the book of this connection, it confirms the distinct parallel between the insufficiency of words to describe ice as well as queerness. This insufficiency of language to describe ice, and subsequently queerness, is represented through the blank space surrounding the paragraphs on ice at the end of the book.

Fleischmann more directly represents the insufficiency of language in describing their queer relationship to Simon in the lineated sections of *Time*. These distinctive sections interrupt the prose paragraphs of the book repeatedly throughout and are one of the most visually striking formal elements of *Time*. The first time Fleischmann moves into this form, they explain it as a way to work through their relationship with Simon, someone they introduce as a "friend," but write that this is "a word that reduced our odd joining to something less than what it was"—a queer relationship for which there are not words to describe (3). Simon, Fleischmann writes, made them "buzz with the anticipation

of falling asleep all day" and the extra white space in these lineated sections is, according to the author, "room for that buzzing along my words" (3). When words are not enough to describe Fleischmann's relationship to Simon, they turn to the formal element of blank space to communicate the experience of this queer relationship.



I share the room with a third friend, Simon.
He, like me, thinks often of the breaking of ice or glass.
In the living room is a small round table with a lamp at its center.
Surrounding the lamp is a pile of individually wrapped candies,
thirty or forty maybe, all of them a crisp and glistening blue.
They are quiet until you touch them, and then they crinkle.

The first time I walked up to *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* I stood before the piece by Felix Gonzalez-Torres for two or three minutes, a few feet back.
A friend had earlier explained it to me, so I knew I was allowed to step forward and take a piece of the candy.
I selected one wrapped in bright yellow foil.
I knelt, lifted it, and fingered it for a moment before unwrapping.
I placed it in my mouth.
I sucked at the candy as I continued to look at the pile, slightly diminished.
I felt for a moment an acute sense of loss and beauty, each indistinguishable from the other.
The candy was very sweet, and it was melting.

I have never properly lived in Brooklyn, but spend time here every season or two.
I come to see the doctor who gives me the hormones that make my body different.
New York is a city where people talk often of how it was.
I glanced the place for years, first in poetry and novels, then visual art,
the idea of it suggesting something like possibility, so far from what I knew in small-town Michigan that it suggested I could be possible, too.

This spring, I came during an exhibit at the New Museum titled *NYC 1993*, and made plans to attend the show with my friend Benjy the day before his own opening in Chelsea.
Instead, I stayed out the night before until sunrise, Jägerbombs and drunken arguments with strangers, and slept into the next afternoon with Simon's arm slung across my body.
Now, returned to the city for the summer, I see that the Whitney hosts a similar exhibit: *I, You, We*, a survey of the museum's collection from the eighties and early nineties.
When I attend, I walk the lopsided circle of the show twice, embarrassed by my sentimentality.
I try to think of the world when the art was made, and I try to think of now.
It's odd, when everyone seems to look back to the same time at once, to realize collectively that it can be seen from a new perspective.
It reminds me that we're all telling ourselves a story, as we try to understand where we've arrived.

There is a heat wave in New York City.
One day, as I'm suggesting I'd go again to the Whitney if they wanted to see the show, two friends and I become incapable of leaving Simon's small, air-conditioned bedroom.
We lie together on the bed—
Simon beside my left arm, our friend Henri beside my right.
In the past I have imagined what it would be like to date each of them.
In the past I let this affect how I behaved when we were together, rather than letting any of us be who we are,
horny and joined somewhere between the platonic and the erotic.
We scroll through gay hookup applications on our phones, comparing the men with whom we occasionally chat.

Both Nelson and Fleischmann use blank space capaciously to queer their texts and represent the insufficiency of language in writing about queerness. The blank spaces in *The Argonauts* are consistent, breaking up the small chunks of text that make up the book. Blank space notably often follows the unanswered questions that she poses about queerness, and therefore emphasize their unanswerability, maintaining the necessary ineffability of queerness. Fleischmann formally uses blank space in a variety of ways throughout *Time,* but also to the same ends of writing about queerness beyond the use of language. The nonnormative use of blank space in both texts is formally queer.

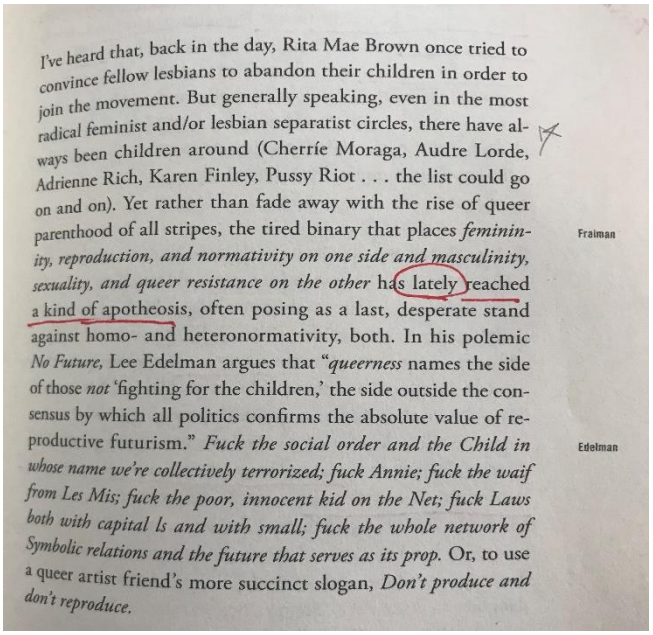
Incomplete Integration of Outside Texts

A third element of collage form that Nelson and Fleischmann use queerly is the incomplete integration of outside texts. Formally, both writers incompletely integrate the outside texts into their primary works, which is queer in its deviation from normative citation form. Queering their integration of outside texts allows the writers to express queerness beyond the use of language. Nelson assembles *The Argonauts* from quotations from a wide variety of other thinkers, whereas Fleischmann collages other projects of their own in *Time*. Both writers' amalgamation of outside sources is an element of their work of low theory, which Halberstam describes as "Assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory" (16). The assemblage of eccentric texts and subsequent production of low theory in *The Argonauts* and *Time* queers the texts as it deviates from normative methods of knowledge which maintain a binary between high and low culture or one particular literary style. By being integrated incompletely into the texts, the formal integration of outside texts in *The Argonauts* and *Time* allows for the irresolution that is central to both queerness and the collage form. As Shields writes, "Collage is a demonstration of the many becoming the one, with the one never fully resolved because of the many that continue to impinge upon it" (112). It is through incompletely integrating their outside sources that Nelson and Fleischmann are able to emphasize and maintain the irresolution that is necessary for writing about queerness indirectly and thus in a queer form.

Nelson constructs *The Argonauts* as collage form from a collection of outside texts that she places in conversation with her own original writing. Nelson quotes a vast range of people, including the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, the contemporary singer

Mary Lambert, the cultural theorist Judith Butler, and Nelson's partner Harry, to only name a few. This amalgamation of references from critical theory to pop culture to personal life speaks to Halberstam's low theory as an alternative, or queer, method of knowledge making. Most of the sources Nelson pulls from are about queerness, or she at least uses them to buttress her ideas on queerness. Nelson emphasizes the irresolution necessary for low theory and writing about queerness through the way she formally integrates the outside sources.

Nelson italicizes quotes and places the last name of the writer next to the quote in the margin, integrating them into her text in an untraditional way. The fragmentary quotes are integrated seamlessly into Nelson's own writing, such as when she writes, "Yet rather than fade away with the rise of queer parenthood of all stripes, the tired binary that places *femininity, reproduction, and normativity on one side and masculinity, sexuality, and queer resistance on the other* has lately reached a kind of apotheosis, often posing as a last, desperate stand against homo- and heteronormativity, both" (75). By putting most of the quotes in italics rather than quotation marks, she integrates them more seamlessly into her own words, suggesting that there is no hierarchy to the works and therefore doing the queer work of low theory.



I've heard that, back in the day, Rita Mae Brown once tried to convince fellow lesbians to abandon their children in order to join the movement. But generally speaking, even in the most radical feminist and/or lesbian separatist circles, there have always been children around (Cherríe Moraga, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Karen Finley, Pussy Riot . . . the list could go on and on). Yet rather than fade away with the rise of queer parenthood of all stripes, the tired binary that places *femininity, reproduction, and normativity on one side and masculinity, sexuality, and queer resistance on the other* has lately reached a kind of apotheosis, often posing as a last, desperate stand against homo- and heteronormativity, both. In his polemic *No Future,* Lee Edelman argues that "*queerness* names 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." *Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from Les Mis; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital ls and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.* Or, to use a queer artist friend's more succinct slogan, *Don't produce and don't reproduce.*

Fraiman

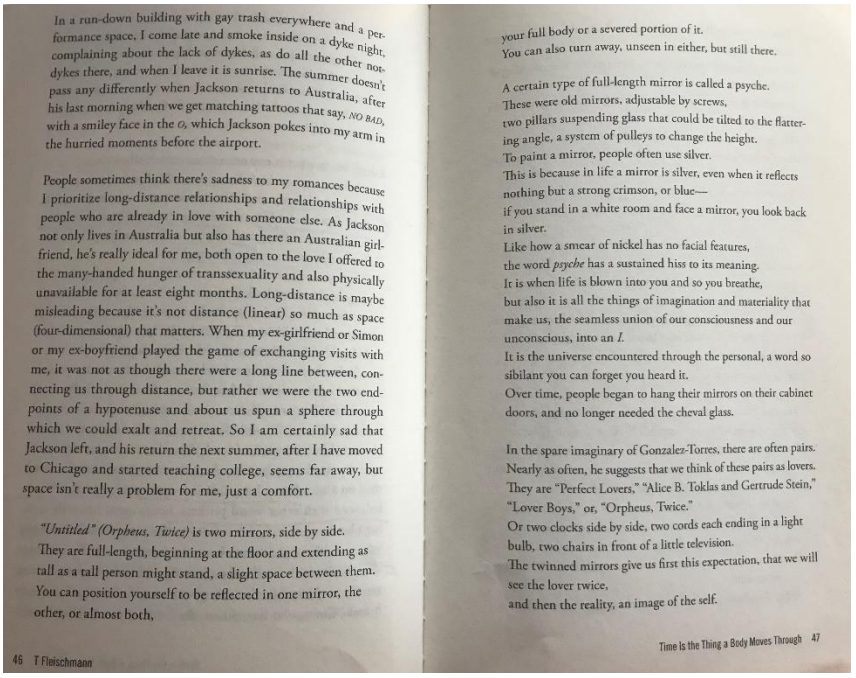
Edelman

This seamlessness is also achieved through Nelson's avoidance of using full in-text citations or footnotes. In the margin next to this sentence on queer parenthood is merely the name "Fraiman," the extent of the attribution for the italicized quote. *The Argonauts* notably lacks a bibliography, and so Nelson's minimal in-text citations emphasizes the incompletion that is necessary when writing about queerness. Nelson's formal use of quotations raises more questions than answers (what text is this from? What year was it written? Does Nelson agree with the quote?). The incomplete integration of outside texts thus contributes to *The Argonauts* work of doing low theory and is queer, allowing Nelson to write indirectly about queerness beyond the use of language.

Fleischmann also emphasizes the irresolution necessary when writing indirectly about queerness through their incomplete citations of outside texts, but unlike Nelson, the outside texts they use are other projects of their own. While Fleischmann draws from a few sources like the letters of Gonzalez-Torres and *The Ice Museum: In Search of the Lost Land of Thule* (2006) by Joanna Kavenna, it is through their use of their own writing

from outside materials that they create a collage form and emphasize irresolution about queerness. They include two of their own pieces within their text that seem to not be part of the original text, both due to their slightly smaller font and what Fleischmann says about them within *Time.*

The aforementioned lineated sections that differ from the rest of the book both in their use of blank space and in their content are part of one outside text that Fleischmann incorporates into *Time*. While there is some overlap in the people and topics mentioned in the lineated sections and the rest of the book, these sections are particularly focused on the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Fleischmann's relationship to Simon and take place in a different period of time than the rest of the book. There are multiple moments within *Time* that Fleischmann suggests that the lineated sections are part of another project that they are working on. At the beginning of *Time,* Fleischmann refers to this project when they write, "I scrunch up into my laptop and open the thing I'm writing, a project I began in the erotic vibrations of my friendship with Simon several years ago" (3). What quickly follows is the first lineated section that deals with Fleischmann's friendship to Simon, suggesting that this is an excerpt of a larger project that is separate from *Time*. Fleischmann also writes later in a more typical prose paragraph that they are working on "a book about Felix Gonzalez-Torres, ice, and sex" (40). I read this as a description of the project from which the lineated sections are from, as they are also primarily about these topics. Fleischmann thus separates the lineated sections from *Time,* suggesting that it is part of a different project.



In a run-down building with gay trash everywhere and a performance space, I come late and smoke inside on a dyke night, complaining about the lack of dykes, as do all the other non-dykes there, and when I leave it is sunrise. The summer doesn't pass any differently when Jackson returns to Australia, after his last morning when we get matching tattoos that say, *NO BAD*, with a smiley face in the ☺, which Jackson pokes into my arm in the hurried moments before the airport.

People sometimes think there's sadness to my romances because I prioritize long-distance relationships and relationships with people who are already in love with someone else. As Jackson not only lives in Australia but also has there an Australian girlfriend, he's really ideal for me, both open to the love I offered to the many-handed hunger of transsexuality and also physically unavailable for at least eight months. Long-distance is maybe misleading because it's not distance (linear) so much as space (four-dimensional) that matters. When my ex-girlfriend or Simon or my ex-boyfriend played the game of exchanging visits with me, it was not as though there were a long line between, connecting us through distance, but rather we were the two endpoints of a hypotenuse and about us spun a sphere through which we could exalt and retreat. So I am certainly sad that Jackson left, and his return the next summer, after I have moved to Chicago and started teaching college, seems far away, but space isn't really a problem for me, just a comfort.

"Untitled" (Orpheus, Twice) is two mirrors, side by side.
They are full-length, beginning at the floor and extending as tall as a tall person might stand, a slight space between them.
You can position yourself to be reflected in one mirror, the other, or almost both,

your full body or a severed portion of it.
You can also turn away, unseen in either, but still there.

A certain type of full-length mirror is called a psyche.
These were old mirrors, adjustable by screws,
two pillars suspending glass that could be tilted to the flattering angle, a system of pulleys to change the height.
To paint a mirror, people often use silver.
This is because in life a mirror is silver, even when it reflects nothing but a strong crimson, or blue—
if you stand in a white room and face a mirror, you look back in silver.
Like how a smear of nickel has no facial features,
the word *psyche* has a sustained hiss to its meaning.
It is when life is blown into you and so you breathe,
but also it is all the things of imagination and materiality that make us, the seamless union of our consciousness and our unconscious, into an *I*.
It is the universe encountered through the personal, a word so sibilant you can forget you heard it.
Over time, people began to hang their mirrors on their cabinet doors, and no longer needed the cheval glass.

In the spare imaginary of Gonzalez-Torres, there are often pairs.
Nearly as often, he suggests that we think of these pairs as lovers.
They are "Perfect Lovers," "Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein,"
"Lover Boys," or, "Orpheus, Twice."
Or two clocks side by side, two cords each ending in a light bulb, two chairs in front of a little television.
The twinned mirrors give us first this expectation, that we will see the lover twice,
and then the reality, an image of the self.

The project from which the lineated sections are drawn is incomplete and disjointed within *Time*, opening up more questions than answers and allowing for the indirectness that is necessary when writing about queerness and creating low theory. The lineated sections do not come together to create a final product, and because they are primarily about topics related to queerness, Fleischmann is thus able to maintain the irresolution necessary for writing about this concept through their incomplete formal integration of the project.

Formally different from these lineated sections but still dealing with queerness is the account of the "Publick Universal Friend" which Fleischmann suddenly inserts into the middle of the book from pages 71 to 86. A true story that Fleischmann researched, it is an account of someone from the 1700s who was gender non-conforming. Fleischmann's tale is very detailed, devoid of the voice present in the rest of the book, and dry in style. These stylistic elements separate this section starkly from the rest of

Time, as does Fleischmann's decision to put it in a slightly smaller font, like the lineated sections. This story seems jarring and out of place in *Time* and is only connected to the rest of the book in its interest in non-normative gender. Fleischmann's only acknowledgement of the story of the Publick Universal Friend in the rest of *Time* is in the sentence after the story when they write, "I try to tell a girl at a trans-centric queer party in Chicago about the Publick Universal Friend but she seems either bored or offended, I can't tell which" (86). This does not explain why they decided to include the entire story written as they did. By opening up more questions than answers with their inclusion of this story and its starkly different formal and stylistic elements, Fleischmann is doing the work of low theory and emphasizing the irresolution necessary particularly for writing about queerness.

Both *The Argonauts* and *Time* are formed from a disparate collection of texts, the former of outside works and the latter of other works by the author. The eccentricity of the texts contributes to the writers' production of low theory, and also allows for questions and irresolution necessary for writing about queerness within capturing its ineffability. Both writers use formal elements to emphasize the foreignness of the outside texts; Nelson puts quotations in italics and Fleischmann puts the excerpts of their other projects in a smaller font and lineated differently from the rest of the book. In both books, questions remain about the outside texts which makes their integration queer. Nelson's are not fully cited as she only provides the last time of the author in the margins next to their quote and refrains from including a bibliography. And though Fleischmann suggests that their outside works are part of different projects, they do not fully explain where they are from or include them in their entirety. Nelson and Fleischmann's formal use of

outside texts, whether it be others' or their own, opens up questions, allows for irresolution, and deals with queerness indirectly.

Conclusion

When language is not enough to write about queerness, or risks being injurious to the concept in its attempt to capture its ineffability, as we understand through the work of Morrison, Butler, and Muñoz, Nelson and Fleischmann turn to queering the formal elements of their books to write indirectly about queerness. By writing in the collage form and using the elements of blank space, non-linearity, and the incomplete integration of outside texts, Nelson and Fleischmann queer the normative forms of the genres they are working in—memoir and the essay, respectively. Queering the form of their books allows Nelson and Fleischmann write indirectly about queerness without relying fully on language and thus avoiding capturing the concept's necessary ineffability. Queering the form also helps Nelson and Fleischmann to achieve another goal of their texts, which I will explore in my next chapter. Both writers express a desire to invoke queer bodily experience through their writing, which I will argue the queer form allows them to do. Through form, the writers affirm the realness of bodies that are at risk of being erased without capturing the ineffability of the bodies' queerness.

Chapter III: "Success in Circuit Lies"

Maggie Nelson and T Fleischmann both express a desire to represent the real in their books. For both writers, "realness" is an affirmation of bodily existence. The types of bodies that they attempt to represent in their books are nonnormative and queer, and thus perpetually at risk of cultural erasure, making the affirmation of their realness particularly important. In this chapter, I acknowledge that Judith Butler explains that expressing one's experience through language is one way to avoid this erasure. But, as I have argued, both Nelson and Fleischmann recognize the danger in relying on language to write about queerness as words risk damaging the ineffability of the concept. This raises a paradox for Nelson and Fleischmann's intentions for their books to represent the realness of queer bodies. I argue that the writers are successful in affirming their realness of the queer bodies they write about through the queer form of their books.

By refusing genre categories for their books and writing non-linearly, Nelson and Fleischmann invoke nonnormative bodies through the queer form of their books. In doing so, they prove that even that which cannot be named is still real. Finally, I recognize that both writers' desire to affirm their own realness is coupled with a desire to extend this sense of realness to others, which I read as an act of queer collectivity. I argue that it is through the formal elements of collage that I analyzed in chapter two that they are able to invite others into their works. Through the formal elements that I analyzed in chapter two, Nelson and Fleischmann write about queerness in a "slant" way. Or, to use another word Emily Dickinson poses in the second line of her poem, they approach queerness circuitously, moving around the concept rather than pinning it down. In this chapter, I will argue that, despite moving away from relying on language, both Nelson and

Fleischmann succeed in their goal of affirming the realness of the bodies they write about through queer form. This is important because the queer bodies they invoke in their works of literature are at risk of being culturally erased.

Realness

In a 2013 interview in *Gulf Coast*, Nelson remarks that all of her work is linked by "an intense and ongoing desire to see and say, to document, to observe, to research, to bear witness, to articulate elements of the so-called 'real'" (Nelson, "The 'f-word': fragment and the futility of genre classification). In *The Argonauts,* Nelson describes her idea of realness as heavily inspired by the work of early twentieth-century psychologist D.W. Winnicott, a concept that she says he "describes as the collected, primary sensation of aliveness, 'the aliveness of the body tissues and working of body-functions, including the heart's action and breathing'" (14). The realness that Nelson is so compelled to document in her work is bodily. It is not a claiming of identity, as she writes, "Any fixed claim on realness, especially when it is tied to an identity, also has a finger in psychosis," which she claims Winnicott's idea of realness departs from (14). According to Nelson, Winnicott describes feeling real as "a sensation that spreads," something mutable and unfixed, like the queerness that Nelson writes about (14). One cannot fix a claim on realness with an identity term because it does not allow for the inevitable shifting of identity and elements of realness beyond the naming of a category. Feeling real, according to Nelson, is not claiming an identity category or finding a word to describe oneself, but rather turning one's attention to bodily experience as a collection of senses and feelings.

Fleischmann is slightly less explicit about their investment in realness than Nelson, but they express the desire for their writing to affirm the realness of their own bodily, sensory experience. Fleischmann's investment in realness is related to the types of bodies they write about: queer, nonnormative, not widely represented in culture, and thus particularly important to document. Introducing a paragraph about bodily, sensory experience, Fleischmann asks, "Isn't it strange, to grow up in a culture where your own experience is so completely erased that you don't even realize you're possible until your early twenties?" (87). Fleischmann suggests that this sense of erasure was their experience as a self-identified trans person with nonnormative relationships and ways of being in the world. Not seeing representations of experiences like theirs in culture made them unaware of their own realness. They suggest that they want their writing to resist this erasure, as they immediately follow this question with the passage:

> "If I am adding myself to the crowd of people who write, I would like it sometimes to be me when I am warm. I would like people to know that I am happy, sometimes. Like after I eat a weed brownie, and the warm feeling seems to come up inside and fill me, the warmth even exceeding me, a gooey brownie feeling of who I am. A warm person holding someone and feeling entirely present in that moment" (87-88).

They use the feeling of eating a weed brownie, a sensory experience of "warmth," as a feeling of "who I am," tracing a relationship between sensory experience and the affirmation of their own real existence. By immediately following their question about erasure with descriptions of bodily experience in the same paragraph, Fleischmann establishes a direct connection between their desire for their nonnormative existence to be

represented and the power in writing to do so. The representation they desire looks like a description of bodily experience, like feeling warm. Writing *Time* is a way for them to document nonnormative bodies and experiences through formally nonnormative writing.

Nelson and Fleischmann's desire to express the realness of the nonnormative bodies they write about raises a paradox for their books in which, as I discuss in chapter one, both writers express a desire to move away from language. Language seems to be the most obvious way through which the writer would assert their realness in the work—using words to describe themselves. While Butler writes about the injurious power of language in *Excitable Speech*, she also acknowledges its power to sustain and affirm the realness of a body, particularly those not widely represented. Butler writes, "Language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible" (5). Butler recognizes that language can affirm the existence of a body considering that we are "linguistic beings, beings who require language in order to be" (1). Affirming the existence of the queer bodies that they write about is a mission central to both Nelson and Fleischmann's works, though they also both recognize the limits of language in doing so.

While both Nelson and Fleischmann think that language is more injurious for describing queerness, they do acknowledge its sustaining power. Nelson writes that it can be impossible for some to claim identity terms, but she also acknowledges that "Some people find pleasure in aligning themselves with an identity" (Nelson 14-15). And even though Fleischmann writes now that it is unpleasant for them to claim identity terms for gender and sexuality, they write, "I used to insist on my identities, that I was a bisexual

boy, or genderqueer, or a queer" (64). While they don't explain exactly why they used these words to identify themselves, it was likely because, as Butler articulates, we require "language to be." However, Nelson still maintains her stance that words are not enough to write about queerness; likewise, Fleischmann still insists on keeping their gender and sex life "uninscribed by language." How, then, are they able to represent the queer body, which is so often at risk of being erased, if not through relying on language and while still maintaining the ineffability of queerness? To think about this question, I turn to writing on queer abstract art and then return to the formal elements of *The Argonauts* and *Time.*

The queer body in abstract visual art

This question of invoking the queer body indirectly beyond the use of language is one that some contemporary abstract artists wrestle with in their work. Writing on queer abstract art has helped me think about invoking the body beyond the use of language. The significant difference between visual art and text is the medium; visual art can refuse language entirely, whereas text is still necessarily constructed from it. However, both have the potential for invoking the queer body without explicitly representing it. In the introduction to a roundtable discussion called "Queer Abstraction," Ashton Cooper writes:

> "a new generation of queer, genderqueer, and transgender artists are taking up abstraction to deal with issues of gender—and, in this case, to talk about the body without representing or signifying it explicitly. In his recent research, art historian David J. Getsy has asked, 'What happens when the body is invoked but not imaged?' In such a mode of image making, abstract art exceeds the constraints of

> binary logic; the body is posited as a catalog of sensory experiences and a place of flux" (286).

Like Nelson and Fleischmann, these artists that Cooper writes about want to represent the body, and particularly the queer body, through its sensory experiences. They want to invoke the body but not explicitly depict it. It is through the form of their work that abstract artists are able to do this, as Cooper explains, "the formal qualities of their work plunge us into indeterminacy, making us step outside prevailing modes of understanding both selfhood and language" (286). It is also the formal qualities of Nelson and Fleischmann's textual work that allows them to invoke the queer body while not fully depicting it, maintaining the indeterminacy and irresolution necessary to queerness.

As I've already introduced, one abstract artist who represents the queer body implicitly is Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whose work Fleischmann writes about extensively in *Time.* As curator Nancy Spector writes, "The body is everywhere present in Gonzalez-Torres's work, yet it is rarely visible as such" (140). Fleischmann is deeply interested in this aspect of Gonzalez-Torres's art, which informs their own attempts to invoke the body in their writing. One Gonzalez-Torres piece that Fleischmann interprets as particularly implicitly representative of the body is a pair of mirrors, about which they write, "In a practice that suggests bodies spilled and gestured toward, *"Untitled" (Orpheus, Twice)* also seems to me one of the most embodied works. / Maybe that crude fact, that it is my own self filling that mirror, makes it so" (53). Even the reflection of the viewer's body cannot be contained or captured in this piece, meaning that the artwork does not explicitly represent the body, but rather invokes it. Fleischmann recognizes this, writing, "The mirrors, then, are a rare instance where the body is mimetic, even in motion" (53).

A body in motion has queer connotations, as Muñoz theorizes queerness as "a longing that propels us onward," something which necessitates movement towards a different place (1). Gonzalez-Torres's *"Untitled" Orpheus* invokes the body but queerly does not explicitly represent it.

Spector also suggests other queer implications of Gonzalez-Torres's refusal to represent the body explicitly: "By deemphasizing the figurative, he seeks to encourage a more open-ended reading of the work, one that does not presume a specific gender configuration or sexual orientation" (Spector 144). This movement away from identity markers in Gonzalez-Torres's work maintains the ineffability of queerness that Butler and Muñoz write about. Fleischmann recognizes this aspect of Gonzalez-Torres's work as well, writing, "A body absent is a body that cannot be set, cannot be anchored in place and subjected to the process by which we racialize, gender, assess through our senses," maintaining its queer potential in its ineffability (53).

Queer abstract art and analysis on the subject illuminate the possibility of invoking the queer body beyond the use of written language, but Nelson and Fleischmann aren't visual artists. They are writers, but they are writers who are interested in moving away from language towards an emphasis on form. How, then, do Nelson and Fleischmann represent the queer body through the form of their books? By answering this question, we can see how writers can move beyond language to use form to not only write about queerness, but also invoke the queer body and affirm its realness.

"The book is a body in a form"

The queer form of their books invokes the queer bodies that Nelson and Fleischmann write about. In his essay "Genre-Queer" in *Bending Genre,* Kazim Ali argues that "the book is a body in a form" (36). As suggested by the essay's title, Ali writes about queer bodies in particular. He sees the parallel between the book and the body stemming from the parallel between genre and gender as he writes, "if we want to think about genre like gender it means we are thinking of the book as a body" (33). Several of the writers in *Bending Genre* acknowledge the shared etymology of genre and gender[1]. Both concepts categorize and sometimes constrain what they categorize, as Ali writes, "gender and genre derive from the same classifying, categorizing impulse—the impulsive not to invent but to consume, commodify, *own*" (29). Books that avoid this categorizing impulse, Ali writes, are works "whose genre is unto themselves, whose whole texts live with bodies ungenred as genderqueer bodies, take their own gender unto themselves, neither accepting one category nor another" (Ali 36). *The Argonauts* and *Time* are examples of these kinds of books that Ali writes about, as they avoid genre categories due in part to their queer formal elements. By being in collage form, *The Argonauts* and *Time* borrow from multiple genres and don't fit into any particular one. The queer form of the books invokes the queer bodies that Nelson and Fleischmann want to make real through their writing, while moving beyond language to do so.

[1] Perhaps this relationship is emphasized to an excessive degree, as Fleischmann suggests in their essay in the collection when they write, "the fact that genre and gender share an etymology always remains conveniently obvious" and multiple writers acknowledge this fact ("Ill-Fit the World" 50). However, it remains helpful in terms of thinking about the way both concepts can categorize and constrain.

Nelson avoids categorizing the genre of her books for similar reasons she avoids using "queer" as an identity term. When Fleischmann asks Nelson if she considers herself an essayist in the *Essay Daily* interview, she remarks that genre categories reign in the possibilities of her writing, saying, "I don't think about genre very much, though I get it that a lot of people are these days. I think that, if I ever have the suspicion that a particular conversation might inhibit or delimit my writing, I self-protectively steer away from it, which is what I've ended up doing on this account." While, according to the back of the book, *The Argonauts* is classified as "memoir/criticism," within the book, Nelson expresses that this classification does not entirely fit, writing that sometimes she is "in drag as a memoirist" (114). In this comment, she connects genre to gender as they both are categories that one can take on but do not fully encompass the realness of what they refer to.

The queer form of *The Argonauts* makes it hard to precisely fit into any genre categories. While Nelson's personal narrative of her relationship to Harry and her pregnancy is memoiristic, by being told non-linearly it resists the typical linear structure of a memoir. And the copious quotes from philosophers and writers throughout the text give it the quality of criticism, but the incompleteness of the citations makes it fall outside of typical academic criticism. By refusing genre categorization through the form of her work, Nelson maintains the ineffability of *The Argonauts*' genre, like the queerness she writes about and the bodies she represents.

Fleischmann similarly evades strict genre categorization in *Time* in a way that is related to queerness. The category of "an essay" is stamped on the cover of *Time*, and Fleischmann embraces the term, but this move also resists genre categorization. In the

introduction to *Body Forms,* they argue that "the essay is exciting because of its hybridity, its slipping among genres" (vi). "The essay" might seem like a category, but to Fleischmann it is one that is capacious and represents a resistance to categorization. Fleischmann also draws a direct connection between the essay form and queerness when they write, "Queerness has been useful to me in its ability to never land, to divorce itself from the ideas to which we attach it and to complicate itself further as it explores. Essays are similarly weird" (vi). Their interest in genre and queerness is ultimately rooted in the project of invoking the queer body as they conclude the introduction by writing, "And that, the discord and the harmony, the promiscuity of reading and the return to the body that we celebrate and resist, is the goal of this project. Placing queerness and the essay together, two weird things that shift, and how they then shift more, again" (viii). By calling *Time* "an essay," Fleischmann resists constraining genre categories, reflecting the nonnormative bodies that it represents that also avoid categorization.

Both Nelson and Fleischmann write about queer bodies as non-linear. By writing their books in the non-linear form that I described and analyzed in chapter two, the writers invoke the queer bodies they want to represent without describing them explicitly. Fleischmann argues that the body, and particular the transitioning body, is non-linear:

> "I distrust linearity, but bodies can seem like one of the only linear things—age, getting bigger and then smaller, death. Another reason to appreciate the transitioning body, which ages backward, every person seeming to become younger, with or without hormones. It's a good reminder that the body was never linear in the first place" (59).

While bodies operating within the "straight time" that Halberstam and Muñoz write about can be regarded as linear, the transitioning body steps out of that linearity. Fleischmann is pointing to the idea that people who transition might not experience time in the same way as cisgender people do because, for one, the time when they were not out as trans might not count to them as time spent as who they really are. In "The Old-School Transsexual and the Working-Class Drag Queen," Grace Lavery explains, writing that the "temporality of the closet" "can feel in retrospect both like 'dead time,' the cryogenetic time of waiting." For trans people, the cisnormative idea of time as progressing linearly may not apply to their experience of temporality.

Nelson writes about Harry's transition in a way that presents another way of thinking about how the transitioning queer body can disrupt linear temporality. She brings into question another identity term—trans—when she writes, "'trans' may work well enough as shorthand, but the quickly developing mainstream narrative it evokes ('born in the wrong body,' necessitating an orthopedic pilgrimage between two fixed destinations) is useless for some," including Harry who says, "*I'm not on my way anywhere*" (52-53). For Harry, transitioning is marked by a lack of forward movement from one point to the next, therefore disrupting linearity.

Nelson also describes her pregnancy, the other central bodily experience in *The Argonauts,* as a non-linear bodily experience. Nelson suggests that pregnancy is queer when she asks, "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). Nelson emphasizes the queerness of the bodily experience of pregnancy by describing it as non-linear when she writes, as she is

giving birth to her son Iggy at the very end of the book, "If all goes well, the baby will make it out alive, and so will you. Nonetheless, you will have touched death along the way" (Nelson 134). In this collapse of new life and death, Nelson disrupts the notion of a linear bodily experience making it instead somewhat cyclical. This collapse is starkly emphasized in the form of the end of the book when Iggy's birth scene is interwoven with Harry's writings on the death of his mother.

By writing the narratives of their books in a non-linear, queer form, Nelson and Fleischmann represent the non-linearity of the queer bodily experiences that they write about and affirm the realness of the queer bodies that are at risk of being culturally erased.

Queer Collectivity

For both Nelson and Fleischmann, their desire to affirm their own realness is coupled with a desire to offer a sense of realness to others. This impulse is an example of queer collectivity, an important element of Muñoz's theory of queerness and specifically queer futurity. To Muñoz, queerness's potentiality "lingers and serves as a conduit for knowing and feeling other people" (113). Muñoz argues that keeping queerness on the horizon and critiquing the present order of things is a collective effort. He explains: "From shared critical dissatisfaction we arrive at collective potentiality" (189). The collage form, and particularly the queer elements of blank space and incomplete integration of outside texts in *The Argonauts* and *Time* engage the reader and establish a sense of queer collectivity in the reading experience. These formal elements require the reader to pause and be more active in connecting the disparate elements, offering them a sense of agency in involving them in the reading process and inviting them to insert their

own experiences. Nelson and Fleischmann are thus able to extend this feeling of realness to their readers in an effort towards queer collectivity.

In Nelson's celebration of Winnicott's sensory-centered idea of realness, she writes not only that "One can aspire to feel real," but also that "one can help others to feel real" (14). Helping others to feel real is not giving them identity markers to attach to themselves, as Nelson earlier argues that realness is not about identity when she writes, "Any fixed claim on realness, especially when it is tied to an identity, also has a finger in psychosis," but rather affirming their own bodily experience (14).

Fleischmann is also interested in extending their own feeling of realness to others as, following their description of the warm, sensory, bodily experience they want their writing to invoke, they ask, "Can this offer something? To someone who is not me?" (87-88). These questions close their paragraph that starts with the recognition that they spent years of life thinking that their existence was not possible because their experience was not represented in culture. Fleischmann want to extend their own feeling of realness that they have finally discovered through their writing to others in an act of queer collectivity.

The formal elements of collage including blank space and the incomplete integration of outside texts invite others into the text by encouraging active reader involvement. In his essay "Text Adventure," Ander Monson encourages writers to think about the involvement of the reader, something which is particularly relevant to the collage form when he writes, "Collage starts getting us there, with the reader's nontrivial effort required to make connections, to elide white space and fragment" (89-90). Monson argues that the collage form, with its significant use of blank space and disconnected fragments, encourages readers to be more actively engaged in connected these fragments

despite the white space. However, as I have presented the value in the formal possibilities of white space and non-linear fragments in *The Argonauts* and *Time,* I believe that the reader's engagement comes through in pausing and dwelling on these formal elements. Monson is helpful, however, in bringing up to elements of collage form which I see as holding the most significant possibilities for reader engagement that I will explore further.

Blank space brings the reader in by requiring a more active and collective reading experience. In his book *Reality Hunger,* itself an example of collage form, David Shields writes, "Any opportunity that a writer has to engage the reader intimately in the act of creating the text is an opportunity to grab on to. White space does that." (122). Shields suggests the potential for collectivity in blank space in that it engages the reader "intimately." White space can create a relationship between the writer and the reader that, in the case of *The Argonauts* and *Time,* is an example of queer collectivity. The consistent blank spaces that break up Nelson's paragraphs give the reader a chance to ask questions, to dwell on what has gone unanswered, and to make their own connections between fragments of text separated by space. The entirely blank page at the end of *Time* encourages the reader to pause and to read meaning into the page. Blank space breaks up the text and extends to the reader a chance to reflect.

Nelson and Fleischmann's incomplete integration of outside texts that I analyzed in chapter two also encourage the reader to be actively engaged in reading the text. In Nelson's incomplete citations and Fleischmann's fragmented, disjointed excerpts of their own writing, the writers open up more questions for readers about their texts. In her analysis of *Reality Hunger* in the essay "Positively Negative," Dinty Moore explains how

incorporating outside texts incompletely invites reader involvement, writing, "Shields further complicates his work, and demands further reader participation, by refusing to acknowledge his sources of the quotes" (184). This holds true for Nelson and Fleischmann's works as well. Nelson and Fleischmann both fail to include the full sources of their outside texts, whether authored by others, in the case of Nelson, or themselves, in the case of Fleischmann. In *The Argonauts,* this encourages readers to do their own research to discover what sources the quotes are from. And while reading *Time*, readers must make their own assumptions about the other projects that Fleischmann includes.

Conclusion

Nelson and Fleischmann express similar goals of their books: to affirm the realness of the queer bodies they write about and to extend this sense of realness to others. It is through the queer form of their books that they are able to do both of these things. While queer form helps the writers to move beyond language to write about queerness without capturing its ineffability, as I argued in chapter two, it also allows them to successfully achieve these additional goals of their works. The queer form of the books eschews genre categorization and emphasizes that the queer bodies that Nelson and Fleischmann write about also cannot be categorized. Additionally, Nelson and Fleischmann describe the bodies they write about as non-linear and reflect this in the non-linear form of their books. The queer form invokes the queer bodies beyond the use of language, thus avoiding attempting to injuriously capture queerness's ineffability.

The queer form of *The Argonauts* and *Time* also extends a sense of realness to others as it actively engages the reader, making them aware of their own existence in the

reading experience. By engaging the reader particularly through blank space and the incomplete integration of outside texts, Nelson and Fleischmann create a sense of queer collectivity in their texts.

Conclusion

Ironically, I want to linearly conclude this study by turning to the final lines of *The Argonauts* and *Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through* which intriguingly closely resonate with one another and speak to the themes that I have analyzed throughout this project. Both lines are queer in content and form and return to a focus on the bodily and the collective, reflecting what I've pointed out about the rest of the books throughout this study.

Nelson concludes *The Argonauts* by responding to a quote from Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips' book *Intimacies* that reads, "the joke of all evolution is that it is a teleology without a point, that we, like all animals, are a project that issues in nothing" (qtd. in Nelson 143). In response, Nelson asks, "But is there really such a thing as nothing, as nothingness?" Like she has with her questions all throughout the book, she allows this question to remain unresolved, following with, "I don't know." She allows for the irresolution necessary for writing about queerness without capturing its ineffability.

Nelson shares what she does know, however, in a metered, rhyming line of poetry as the final line of the book, writing, "I know we're still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our care, its ongoing song" (143). In its content this final sentence is queer within Butler and Muñoz's framing of queerness as something that must be unable to be captured in the present but used to move constantly forwards into the future to maintain its political potential. Nelson refers to the song as "ongoing"; something which carries us forever into the future, or as long as we survive, like Butler's description of queerness as something that must be "redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes" and Muñoz's description of the

concept as something which "propels us onward" ("Critically Queer" 19; 1). Formally, this line is queer because it deviates on the sentence level from the normative prose of the rest of the book. In its content and form, this final sentence emphasizes the irresolution and ever-changing nature of the ineffable queerness that Nelson writes about throughout *The Argonauts.*

The final line of *Time* also emphasizes irresolution, particularly through its form. Coincidentally, like Nelson's final line, the final line of *Time* also refers to song as, at the end of the final floating paragraph about ice, Fleischman writes, "Let's sing…" (151). The line's ellipses trail off into the remaining white space of the page and suggest a relentless movement towards the future that can never be resolved, like Muñoz's theory of queerness as something which "propels us onward" relentlessly towards the horizon that we may never reach (1).

And now, of course, I must address the most glaring question that arises when comparing these two final lines: Why do both the writers refer to song, a subject that neither one has addressed in their book up until this point? One theory I have is that song returns the focus to the bodily, a primary intention of the books as I explained in chapter three. Singing is a sensory experience that affirms the realness of our bodies, which Nelson and Fleischmann want their books to do as well. Additionally, the writers' invocation of song is an invocation of the queer collectivity that they have been building throughout their books through their formal elements that actively engage the reader. Nelson uses the first-person plural to remind us that "we are still here" with "our care" and Fleischmann makes the act of singing collectivity by using "Let's." In both final

sentences, Nelson and Fleischmann bring the reader into their relentless, queer, song-filled movement towards the future.

As a reader searching for expansive ideas about queerness told in a queer form, *The Argonauts* and *Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through* offer so much to me, as Nelson and Fleischmann wish. They offer a legitimation of maintaining queerness as something ineffable. They offer an allowance of paradox in their recognition that words are insufficient for writing about queerness but continuing to write about the concept anyway. They offer an affirmation of the realness of the queer body. And finally, they offer a sense of queer collectivity in the reading experience. In these offerings, *The Argonauts* and *Time* bring us towards queerness without ever quite capturing it and that is, precisely, what makes them queer.

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