The Language Stump:
Language and Loss in Maggie Nelson’s Bluets

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“We are the half and half again, we are the language stump.”

- Anne Carson
I. Introduction

My copy of Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets* (2009) is a well-worn object: each of its pages is coated with layers of atextual annotations — underlines, circles, brackets — which have sedimented themselves into an almost geological record of my many readings and re-readings. It is a text I cannot stay away from, and to that end it is one I cannot help but mark as well. Almost all of these annotations share a pair of traits: they are purely gestural (merely drawing attention to some portion of the text), and none have been edited or erased. There is only one exception — beneath the following passage:

6. The half-circle of blinding turquoise ocean is this love’s primal scene. That this blue exists makes my life a remarkable one, just to have seen it. To have seen such beautiful things. To find oneself placed in their midst. Choiceless. I returned there yesterday and stood again upon the mountain. (3)

In the margin under this paragraph — the space between *Bluets*’ sixth and seventh fragments — there are the barely-legible remnants of the phrase “archival parallax,” erased soon after its writing. I wrote these words in an airport, early in the morning, at a time when I didn’t yet know what this essay would be about; I thought, perhaps, it would be an academic chronicle of what it has meant to me to revisit not only a text but its codex, too — “to [stand] again upon the mountain.” I erased them after getting on the plane: writing them had felt like an ugly thing to do, to be smearing such a jargon-filled phrase on a book that had otherwise borne only the most impressionistic markings of my immediate responses. I wanted my copy of *Bluets* to remain, in a word, wordless.

More than this: I wanted my marginalia to exist just beyond the limit of language, a subtle and personal extension of what Nelson had already put on the page; I wanted to build a
mirror to hold up to the text. *Bluets* is a labor in language, exploring the simple possibility that reading and writing can have a profound impact on an individual’s ability to understand and cope with loss. In the pursuit of this, Nelson pushes language to these limit points, asking it not only to articulate, but to enact, and so I wanted to meet Nelson on the other side of this labor — to annotate *Bluets* to the very cusp of language, but to stop at this precipice, leaving only the co-mingled limits of the text and my markings, each speaking through the other.

*Bluets* is a book about language. Ostensibly a book focused on color, loss, and depression, *Bluets* is haunted by the possibility that language can *do* something about these things. The text rarely rests at junctures or declares conclusions unconditionally; rather, Nelson iterates upon ideas (both her own and others’) by essentially testing them in her own writing, investigating their instantiation in the work of other artists and philosophers, or exploring them through hazy memoir-style vignettes. Nelson’s prose is speckled by a desire that language, in certain ways, may be able to do more than simply name colors, losses, and illnesses — may actually come to make and unmake these categories, exercising a power where there is otherwise none. Crosshatched by questions of language’s fixities and failures, *Bluets* is at once an experiment in linguistic forces and a treatise on how language (both its production and consumption) can alter and repair various losses, simultaneously articulating theories of language’s ability to go beyond itself and also performing these capacities (as well as their failures). The boundaries between these techniques blur as Nelson knits together instances of citation with anecdotes and snippets of dialogue — a textual task wrought possible and expedient by the formal structure of the text.
Bluets is rendered across two hundred and forty brief, numbered sections, each a paragraph in length. These sections — which I will otherwise refer to as fragments or propositions — structure a text that behaves alternately and non-exclusively as poetry and memoir by inducing a global sense of rhythm; that is to say, the subdivision of Bluets along formal lines simultaneously generates a trackable cadence by which the text’s movements ebb and flow and also situates it within a genealogy of formal writings whose arguments are charged with the processual forces of enumeration — cases of rhythm as a means of argumentative cohesion.¹ The sequential structure induced by this form undergirds the text with a sense of motion and progression such that in even the simple process of proceeding from one fragment to the next, there is a discernible residue of action and momentum. This momentum is, moreover, always contextual, derived from a fragment’s place with respect to its surroundings, as Nelson says of Bluets in an interview published for continent: “To detect their motion, one has to already be in the car” (“The Fragment as a Unit of Prose Composition”). This contextual progression reifies the sense that Nelson’s language is doing something beyond declaration — it is, at the very least, moving, but it is also this motion that lies at the center of how Nelson constructs many of language’s capacities, since this movement is steeped in the context of language addressing loss and healing with respect to selfhood across time. Bluets is a text defined neither by narrative nor argument, but rather structure. In this way, it facilitates distinct movements from thought to thought in a way that suggests that their intersections, overlaps, and contrasts become the substrate on which Nelson stages her interventions and performs her experiments.

¹ A lineage which notably includes Augustine’s Confessions, Ludwig Wittgenstein Remarks on Color, and Roland Barthes’ A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments.
This continual movement is flooded with citations and allusions, often articulated in concert with one another; *Bluets* habitually summons and recycles bits of text and ideas, configuring and reconfiguring these constellations of thought in service of discovering how language — processes of writing and rewriting — can come to bear on loss and melancholy. The iteration of this process by way of the text’s formal organization produces a dense web of intertextuality. *Bluets* becomes a virtual salon, mediated by the tenor of Nelson’s lyrical prose. By orienting all of these citations towards one another, Nelson arranges the possibility of (and insinuates a template for) experimentation in the capacities of language. As she navigates loss, Nelson repeatedly theorizes, introduces another’s thoughts, and then re-postulates in conversation with these thoughts, often writing in speculative, uncertain veins. It is the proximity of these citations with Nelson’s own voice which brings out the experimental nature, as Nelson moves from source to source in the effortless, undevoted way one might try on an armful of hats:


137. It is unclear what [Billie] Holiday means, exactly, when she sings, “But now the world will know / She’s never gonna sing ‘em no more / No more.” What is unclear: whether she is moving on, shutting up, or going to die. Also unclear: the source of her triumphance.

138. But perhaps there is no real mystery here at all. “Life is usually stronger than people’s love for it” (Adam Phillips): *this* is what Holiday’s voice makes audible. To hear it is to understand why suicide is both so easy and so difficult: to commit it one has to stamp out this native triumphance, either by training oneself, over time, to dehabilitate or disbelieve it (drugs help here), or by force of the *ambush*.

139. “Memory is blue in the head? Heads are easily taken off” (Lorine Niedecker). (52-3)
It is the rapid, discrete movement through which Nelson navigates these citations — moving from self-help book to singer to psychologist to poet — that simultaneously illustrates the way the sequential form lends itself to a moving, momentous sort of language and also makes evident that *Bluets* is a text in which theories are tested and adapted, rarely posited as unequivocally or phenomenologically true. Nelson uses this movement to build an ever-changing assortment of machinery for understanding herself, and loss with respect to this self, while simultaneously displacing onto others (via citation) much of the text that substantiates this movement. The slow slide from the cautionary citation, “Drinking when you are depressed is like throwing kerosene on a fire” to the virtually suicidal, “Memory is blue in the head? Heads are easily taken off” is punctuated by only a handful of Nelson’s interventions: this at once emphasizes that the citational register in which so much of *Bluets* is arranged is a *constructed* register, and also brings the moments of Nelson’s intervention to the forefront, underscoring the fact that the prevalent throughline of these citations is a sense of loss and what follows loss as well as the multiplicitous ways to understand and configure the self in relation to loss.

The nuance of loss appears in these interstitial moments between citations, as Nelson becomes an interlocutor for her sources, inhabiting through language the simultaneous possibilities of loss as “moving on, shutting up, or going to die” and something of more “triumphance.” The multivocal constellation, assembled gradually through the enumerative movement from citation to citation, allows for a critical amount of flexibility in Nelson’s epistemological relationship with loss by showcasing interrelated but diverse ways of apprehending it linguistically. The import of *Bluets* is not in the conclusions it draws or fails to draw, since Nelson is forthcoming in understanding her study is not one conducted in certainties
— rather, *Bluets* operates in possibilities, a perpetual ‘perhaps.’ It is an inquiry into what happens when one hurls language at loss.

Nelson’s *Bluets* is a book about the capacities and faults of language — executed simultaneously as treatise and a hybrid performance-experiment — and how these capacities and faults come to form the way individuals understand loss. Constantly testing and amending its own hypotheses, *Bluets* conducts this study of language in lucid strokes through its numerical structure, lubricated by the repeated interpolation of citations and anecdotes. Language thus becomes a vessel for loss, perhaps comes to enact loss itself. In the fashion of Barthes’ texts of bliss, *Bluets* showcases a selfhood flirting with dissolution, distilled and divided many times over through the citational process, but also triumphant in this dissolution. Nelson as narrator emerges in parallel to Holiday singing the blues — she announces loss, interrogates it, courts it, *performs* it in language. Just as *Bluets* is a sort of experiment for Nelson, it is also a site for the reader’s annotations and sentimental attachment. In a similar fashion to how the text itself is concerned with what language can do to loss, my study becomes invested in how the physical codex — here, my copy of *Bluets* — accrues sentiment and meaning that are at once anchored in the text and ancillary to it. These sites of attachment to a text arise via affective mechanisms but come to form a basis for the interpretive processes involved in literary analysis and study; once visualized, as annotation allows, these affectively-charged moments begin to replicate a type of loss parallel to that which Nelson enacts in language — they become residues of lost readings.
II. From Speech to Text

Maggie Nelson’s writing in general is situated at the intersection between poetry and prose, often occupying fragmentary structures and calling upon citations as a means of unifying diverse voices. *Bluets*, in many ways, forms the template for this sort of exploration, which Nelson recycles in her critically-acclaimed text *The Argonauts* (2015). Nelson repeatedly explores the possibility that a text can operate simultaneously as a vessel for others’ voices (through citation) and a densely constructed personal piece which privileges the author’s perspectives and experiences. By bringing these disparate functions together, Nelson’s stylistic mark is as much one of balance and mediation as it is confessional, indebted to the fragmentary form as a means of making such mediation not only possible but efficacious. In this way, perhaps the most immediately distinct facet of Nelson’s writing is its mingling of the fragmentary form (as well as the history of treatises and philosophical argumentation which it denotes) with a confessional mood.

Much of the discourse available on *Bluets* comes in the form of interviews with Nelson in which she discusses the formal and citational aspects of the text, creating an opportunity for the critical apparatus to double as a device for identifying the methods by which Nelson constructs her linguistic experimentation. Two especially relevant interviews were published by the magazines *BOMB* and *continent.*, where in the former Nelson and avant-garde artist A. L. Steiner interview each other, and in the latter, a piece entitled “The Fragment as a Unit of Prose Composition,” Nelson discusses her arrival at the fragment as the foundational form of her prose. Both deal with language as an almost primitive mode of expression and involve Nelson philosophizing on what linguistic capacities and shortcomings she perceives as undergirding
Blueets, doing important work in terms of guiding the critical discourse surrounding Blueets towards one whose central terms are language and loss.

The most important note to gather from the criticism surrounding Blueets is the general ambiguity regarding even its generic distinctions: in one essay, Alexandra Parsons refers to Blueets as “autobiographical” (Parsons 375) and a “lyrical text” (376) while distinguishing Nelson as “poet, academic, and ‘pioneering writer-of-the-self’” (375), whereas Dorothea Laskey categorizes Blueets as simply a “lyrical meditation” (Laskey 370). Critic Thomas Larson refers to Blueets as a text which “verges on the lyric essay” (Larson). The import here is not to parse some potential disagreement between these critics but rather to emphasize that Blueets sweeps across genres — it is haunted by Nelson as a work of autobiography, reading, and meditation, but also disembodied and nebulous as a work of lyricism. The union of these functions invites both the frameworks of Jonathan Culler’s approach in “Theory of the Lyric” regarding lyric poetry and also Roland Barthes’ theories of selfhood and loss with respect to language and text in The Pleasure of the Text. It is also this tension that stages language and its capacities for actions as the centerpiece of the text through which loss becomes available.

Parsons’ “A Meditation on Color and the Body in Derek Jarman’s Chroma and Maggie Nelson’s Blueets” is concerned with Blueets as a text about color, knitting it into a larger context of queer aesthetic practices “that seek to create new genealogies of meaning and ways of being” enabled and made legible by the cross-genre disposition of Blueets (Parsons 386). For Parsons, the primacy of color in Blueets positions it as essentially a case study of Nelson’s more general discourse regarding the imperfections and failures of language as a means of communication. By writing in the same form as Wittgenstein’s Remarks on Color, Parsons argues, Nelson amplifies
the linguistic ambiguities which Wittgenstein uses color to demonstrate. This premise is simple: the naming of colors is explicitly nominal and only tangentially experiential, so there is always the potential for miscommunication when one uses the name of a color. Parsons supposes that *Bluets* generalizes this phenomenon to all language, arguing that “the discussion of color places the juncture of human perception with language in sharp focus” in the same way that, as Nelson remarks, there is something “audible” in Holiday’s voice which extends beyond the limits of language (Parsons 379). Language thus becomes subservient to color as a focus of Parsons’ essay, but also an invaluable interlocutor in the pursuit of understanding color as a mechanism for queer aesthetic practices.²

Parsons’ emphasis here on language and its perception in *Bluets* as a vessel and mechanism for understanding color is adjacent to my own — where I allow loss to assume the role to which she has lent color — so it is pertinent to linger for another moment on Parsons’ analysis of *Bluets*, understanding the specifics of how she formulates language with respect to color. Parsons retains a focus on color, treating it as parallel to language:

Like language, our understanding of color is part of a shared system of usage within culture, and therefore scientific investigations into the nature of color (by, for example, Isaac Newton) can only be secondary to an understanding of how words denoting color are used in a particular culture. (379)

Parsons is correct in drawing holistic comparisons between color and language as sites where cultural, socially-constructed meanings dominate, but her fixation on the treatment of color as an allegory comes to inhibit her essay’s ability to dissect how Nelson “face[s] the discursive limits

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² This is the case with another work which mention *Bluets*, Dorothea Lasky’s “What Is Color in Poetry, or Is It the Wild Wind in the Space of the Word.” This piece simply mentions *Bluets* in passing, though, as part of a larger survey regarding how innovation in poetry is often coextensive with novel uses of color as a means of espousing imagery and evoking emotions.
of language to usefully define and thereby share our internal and physical worlds” — that is, Parsons aptly identifies the work being done in *Bluets*, but only goes so far as to locate color as a constituent of this process, rather than proceeding to construct a theoretical mechanism which allows one to approach “the discursive limits of language” (379). This is the intervention I propose: a treatment of *Bluets* by way of Speech Act Theory and lyric theory which privileges (and relies upon) an understanding of how Nelson succeeds and fails to “expand the limits of articulacy” (Parsons 380). Parsons’ study is an excellent introduction to the stakes of *Bluets* — its investment in what is and is not possible to enact in language — but it lacks an apparatus for discerning how the studies and experiments which it attributes to *Bluets* are explicable in the text’s formal structure, its senses of tone and narration (as mediated by its multiplicitous relationships with speech and speakers), as well as the web of citations Nelson weaves throughout. All of this, then, continues to revolve around a simple question: *how does Bluets* position language as something with the capacity to *do*?

The mechanisms by which the capacities of speech and language are configured in *Bluets* are ensconced in the dialectics of reader and writer, speaker and listener, and so it is necessary to understand these relational components in order to emphasize that the possibilities of what language can and cannot do have immediate consequences for what meanings are available to the reader and how these interpretations are made available. In *Bluets*, attempts at interpretation are always clouded by the radioactive nature of the language and the textual-numerical sense of progression — the sense that language is at once a tool of narrative and argument wielded towards both declaration and action, all of which is enveloped by the contextual motion Nelson has described as akin to being a passenger in a car. In the space of the text, it is the lyrical nature
of Nelson’s prose which allows it to navigate these categories, but nonetheless there is a dissonance in the way any interpretation demands that the interpreter either excise one of the above categories from the others (treating it as simply narrative, lyric, criticism, or theory) or acknowledge these inextricabilities and render them as the crux of the text, exploring the consequences of such a genre-confused literature. It is, however, the mechanism underwriting these cross-genre consequences — the mechanics and postures of language — that allow it to contour itself at once into poetry and prose, argument and narrative, declaration and action, and it is here where I intervene in the body of scholarship on Nelson’s work.

J. L. Austin theorizes the mechanics of this phenomena in general — the ways in which speech enacts effects in unique and diverse ways — in his seminal essay “How to do Things with Words,” the foundational text for this field of study known as Speech Act Theory, but it is Stanley Fish who reconfigures Speech Act Theory as a methodology for literary analysis. Austin defines a “performative sentence” or a “performative utterance” as sentences which do not simply describe an action but actually perform the action — the canonical example being “I do” spoken at an altar during a marriage ceremony (Austin 52). These sorts of utterances may also be called locutionary acts or speech acts, and these names will prove useful. While Austin is working with the idea of speech actually articulated by individuals, Bluets configures speech on a textual plane so that it is more act than utterance; considering it as an act rather than an utterance, even taxonomically, provides a meaningful amount of flexibility.

Fish intervenes in Austin’s work by mapping the study of Speech Act Theory onto literary analysis, elucidating such a correspondence in his essay, “How to Do Things with Austin and Searle: Speech Act Theory and Literary Criticism.” Fish cautions that literary analysis that
takes locutionary acts as a focal point must go beyond identifying these locutionary acts and supposing that they engender similar consequences (even if only within the diegesis of the text); rather, he argues that these modes of analysis subsist on showing that the text “is about speech acts” (emphasis mine) and exploring how it articulates, via these diegetic speech acts, a theory of the rules of [speech acts’] performance, the price one pays for obeying those rules, the impossibility of ignoring or refusing them and still remaining a member of the community. [The text] is also about what the theory is about, language and its power: the power to make the world rather than mirror it, to bring about states of affairs rather than report them, to constitute institutions rather than (or as well as) serve them. (Fish 1024)

Fish deems texts that explore these rules and their consequences “Speech Act” texts, and it is in this way that Bluets is a Speech Act text: it posits various concrete theories on “language and its power” (often theories which materialize out of the collections of citations Nelson curates), and it performs and experiments with these theories in its argumentative, lyrical movements (1024). These former instances, which may be called articulated theories, are usually stated plainly in Bluets, as when Nelson writes, “When something ceases to bring you pleasure, you cannot talk the pleasure back into it” (Nelson 66). The latter instances of commentary on speech are more submerged, though, producing theories of “language and its power” through example, experimentation, citation, and performance; these may accordingly be called experiments or performances. This type of engagement is exemplified when, in the midst of comparing questions of religious faith and doubt to “playing Pin the Tail on the Donkey” (48), Nelson writes,

125. Of course, you could also just take off the blindfold and say, I think this game is stupid, and I’m not playing it anymore. And it must also be admitted that hitting the wall or wandering off in the wrong direction or tearing off the blindfold is as much a part of the game as is pinning the tail on the donkey. (49)
In this moment, Nelson foregoes theorizing what speech can or cannot do with respect to questions of faith, operating rather through a hypothetical performance: to protest and complain is a valid (and perhaps necessary) part of exploring these questions, and it is only through performing this protest in language and then proceeding to comment upon this performance that Nelson constructs the capacities of speech as something fluid and fuzzy, not judged merely by what it does but also by what it may do. It is Nelson’s imagined articulation, “I think this game is stupid, and I’m not playing it anymore;” that catalyzes a series of consequences which are nonetheless “a part of the game,” and in this way only made available as responses to a speech act. Nelson performs the capacity of speech to engender consequences by displaying an articulation and conjecturing what may follow, rather than merely articulating that speech may have consequences. This is a theory of language that must be performed (rather than articulated) because it is what follows from the articulation, what lies in the “wrong direction,” that is important.

The fabric of *Bluets* is woven together out of these various modes of articulating what Fish has called language’s “power to make the world rather than mirror it, to bring about states of affairs rather than report them.” But similarly integral to the structure of *Bluets* is the iterative citation of so many sources enabled by the form. Judith Butler, in her essay “Performativity’s Social Magic,” supposes that this citational process may be a mode of adhering authority to the text’s stances on and performances of speech acts “through a kind of citation or appropriation of ‘authority’ that effectively produces the effect of authority” (Butler 124). This supposition dovetails with her correlated claim that one’s habitual usage of language in relation to social structures comes to form the self in terms of such structures. It follows that the citation of
authority may modulate between a manipulation of this process of linguistic socialization and, as Nelson uses it, a way of exploring the self with respect to these social institutions via some sense of authority. Nelson navigates the interstices between this sort of citational authority and Fish’s category of Speech Act texts while discussing a self-help book, writing,

88. Like many self-help books, *The Deepest Blue* is full of horrifyingly simplistic language and some admittedly good advice. Somehow the women in the book all learn to say: *That’s my depression talking. It’s not “me.”* (34)

Nelson indulges in the the subtle movement from citing “*The Deepest Blue*” as a means of authority (in Butler’s sense) to handing the hypothetical mouthpiece to “*depression*” all the while qualifying this movement, as “*It’s not ‘me.’*” This slippage also gives primacy to the mouthpiece of language: Nelson consistently attributes different pieces of thought to different sources in such a way that a disconnect between narrator (or self) and text becomes available. This disjuncture may be a generative one, though, as the sentences “*That’s my depression talking. It’s not ‘me’*” do not inevitably denote a unmendable disconnect for Nelson; rather, this slippage is one she comes to manipulate, playing with Butler’s formulation of authority as citational for the sake of effect. After dwelling for several fragments on the convoluted notion that one may disconnect themselves from their depression — “As if we could scrape the color off the iris and still see” — Nelson revisits the possibility of divorcing oneself *as self* from their speech, inhabiting the sentence structure of “*The Deepest Blue*” as a means of iteration:

94. — Well then, it is as you please. This is the dysfunction talking. This is the disease talking. This is how much I miss you talking. This is the deepest blue, talking, talking, always talking to you. (34-5)
The fracturing found here is eruptive and multiplicitous, as opposed to the tidy and surgical fissure espoused by “The Deepest Blue.” These are also hollow divisions, as Nelson similarly works to understand and occupy her “dysfunction,” her “disease,” her sense of “how much I miss you.”

In this way, the turn to “the deepest blue” (a relational component of Nelson’s selfhood which is not understood in any tidy manner), coupled with the thrice-repeated “talking,” advances an attribution of speech to something Nelson has imbued with a divine sense of authority through the very writing of Bluets, its very conceit. Similarly, this turn to “the deepest blue” inhabits the same language as that initial source of citational authority in “The Deepest Blue” such that Nelson’s ability to develop the effect of authority by way of citation actually becomes a method of cultivating authority at large, while also instantiating a sort of loss: by appealing to her citations, Nelson relinquishes one sort of authorial control in favor of another, displaying neatly Bluets’ dualized notion of loss as tragedy and opportunity. It is the accelerating formulation — the progression from a simple, neat cleaving of speech from speaker to this eruptive fracturing which is punctuated by a return to “the deepest blue” — that structures speech (and language) as simultaneously transcendent and tethered to its mouthpiece but nonetheless capable of producing effects for the speaker; this passage is, essentially, an enacted treatise on how loss may be understood simultaneously as a product of “language and its powers” and an opportunity to exercise such linguistic powers.
III. To Utter and Re-Utter: Loss and the Lyric Tradition

Significant in this formulation of speech within *Bluets* is the primacy of language as enacted: a focus on this component of *Bluets* — as well as its relation to the more immediately depictive aspects of the piece — situates it within the lyric tradition as articulated by Jonathan Culler in his essay “Theory of the Lyric.” Culler suggests that “central to the lyric tradition is this tension between fictional/representational elements and the *ritualistic*, everything that can be considered as instructions for performance rather than fictional representation,” marking the lyric tradition by what it does, how it does it, and the relations between the two (Culler 126). Culler adapts his conception of the ritualistic components of the lyric tradition from Roland Greene’s work *Post-Petrarchism*, taking Greene’s understanding of the formal aspects of lyric and refashioning them subtly in terms of performance, utterance, and affect. Culler begins by citing Greene in the following passage, where the quoted portions are Greene’s and the unquoted are Culler’s:

> The ritual element is, first, everything that can be construed as directions for performance: “In the full play of its ritual mode, which goes well beyond prosodic elements to include rhetorical, semantic, and symbolic features, lyric is utterance uniquely disposed to be re-uttered,” and it offers “a performative unity into which readers and auditors may enter at will.” (126)

For *Bluets*, then, the tradition Culler characterizes is simultaneously a source of allusion and a sort of literary heritage; certainly, this is implicit in the fact that Nelson and Culler cite many of the same poets throughout their work, both considering writing by Frank O’Hara (Nelson 57, Culler 120), William Carlos Williams (Nelson 13, 22, 79, Culler 122-3), John Ashbery (Nelson 74, Culler 131), and Wallace Stevens (Nelson 5, Culler 122).
Nelson involves herself in the lyric tradition by tracing it, calling upon it in service of her own writing, proceeding to visit and re-visit this lineage as a means of reconstructing the constitutive aspect of lyric that Greene has called (by way of Culler) “utterance uniquely disposed to be re-uttered.” This is embodied in Nelson’s treatment of William Carlos Williams’ work specifically. The first instance of such a citation stages this formulation of utterance and re-utterance in a number of ways:

32. When I say “hope,” I don’t mean hope for anything in particular. I guess I just mean thinking that it’s worth it to keep one’s eyes open. “What are all those / fuzzy-looking things out there? Trees? Well, I’m tired / of them”: the last words of William Carlos Williams’s English grandmother. (13)

Consider the chain of utterance: Williams, as argues Culler, re-utters in his poem “The Last Words of My English Grandmother” a phrase already uttered by his English grandmother, which Nelson then adopts. In formal terms, Nelson structures a nearly meta-lyrical utterance through allusion, showcasing the act of re-utterance within the text where Culler identifies it as something akin to a disposition incited in the audience — Nelson recycles lyric inside of her own lyric. At the same time, though, this moment enacts a theory of speech’s capacity, an elucidation of what happens when Nelson says “hope.” Bluets unravels as a series of Greene’s “utterance[s] uniquely disposed to be re-uttered” through the recycled collage of texts and thoughts that undergird it; when these citations are adjoined to instances of speech and commentary on speech, the text emerges as an amalgam of utterances and re-utterances, each of which bears on Nelson’s understanding of and relationship to loss.

In a broader sense, the numbering of Bluets as a whole enunciates a ritualistic template for the text, serving as “directions for performance” by orienting the text around interlocking
sequences of narrative and critique. This enumeration allows for a discrete division of the text into individual, utterable components, serving as a guiding mechanism for engaging with segments of the text. As *Bluets* discusses the nuances of historical and romantic notions of “seeking,” the numbering of the fragments emerges as a bracketing apparatus through which the lyrical components of the text surface:

113. In his unfinished novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, Novalis tells the story of a medieval troubadour who sees a little blue flower—perhaps a bluet—in a dream. Afterward he longs to see the blue flower in “real life.” “I can’t get rid of the idea,” he says. “It haunts me.” (Mallarmé, too: “*Je suis hanté. L’Azur! l’Azur! l’Azur! l’Azur!*”) Heinrich knows his obsession is a little singular: “For who would be so concerned about a flower in this world? And I’ve never heard of anyone being in love with a flower.” Nonetheless, he devotes his life to searching for it: thus begins the adventure, the high romance, the romance of seeking.

114. But now think of the Dutch expression: “*Dat zijn maar blauwe bloempjes*”—“Those are nothing but blue flowers.” In which case “blue flowers” means a pack of bald-faced lies.

115. In which case seeking itself is a spiritual error. (45-6)

The enumerative form here becomes the mechanism which frames the lyrical repetition of Nelson’s casual “In which case.” By ending the 114th fragment and beginning the 115th fragment with sentences inaugurated by the phrase “In which case,” Nelson restages the simple utterance as an avenue into the matrix of ways she uses language to explore the lyric “I.” The doubling of this phrase serves as a turn to poetic and lyric form, tumbling into a supposition regarding the very possibilities of desire and its fulfillment when Nelson writes, “In which case seeking itself is a spiritual error.” In this way, the form enables the simple device of repetition to showcase how, through its lyrical capacities, *Bluets* behaves as what Culler calls (via Aristotle) “epideictic, [...], a versified discourse about what is to be valued, praised or blamed” (Culler
This structure also instantiates how Nelson captures the spirit of her pervasive intertextuality here, citing the phrase “I’ve never heard of anyone being in love with a flower,” which comes almost as a long-awaited response to the book’s opening line, “Suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with a color” (1).

Likewise, my own annotations offer a tangible (and in some ways legible) example of how *Bluets* invites and demands the reader to react, engage, and respond, following Greene’s formulation that lyric is “a performative unity into which readers and auditors may enter at will.” Roland Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text* outlines the terms on which readers may find themselves (and make themselves) in their own readings and interpretations — in some ways schematizing how Nelson’s citational writing is always oriented inwards — but moves beyond this to engage how texts can structure their readers as subjects and how this structuring gives way to two categories of experience or impact: pleasure and bliss. For Barthes, this distinction is tenuous and perhaps fraught, but nonetheless central to apprehending what it means to be a reader. He conceives of the “text of pleasure” as that which does not disrupt or destabilize in a meaningful way the strictures of the readerly subject — a text which works with the subject — and compares this with the “parallel force” of the “text of bliss,” which is one that demands and engages “a split subject, who simultaneously enjoys, through the text, the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall” (20, 21). Barthes proceeds by exploring how each of these impacts is enacted in and induced by the text itself, although this exploration is often vague and ambivalent.

On an essential level, the text articulates modes of reading that privilege the reader’s experience as a means of making meaning and guiding interpretation, and argues that readers are
always enmeshed in these modes of reading — that readers may never escape their own
subjectivities, and therefore their readings and interpretations are always subservient to
associated questions of subjectivity. This corresponds with Butler’s notion of citational authority,
as Barthes positions the self in terms of the text and Butler suggests that speakers are formed (or
perhaps effaced) in terms of the citational modes of authority made available. Both Barthes and
Butler thus suppose the necessity of loss to some degree in the processes of speaking and
reading. These categories Barthes formulates describe a circumstance frequently encountered in
Bluets: Nelson positions herself as a consumer in relation to some text of bliss, displaying the
convolutions (and losses) of her selfhood, at moments when Bluets itself functions for the reader
as a text of bliss by advocating multiple, often contradictory philosophies regarding selfhood in
terms of loss. This parallel structures the capacities of language as something which does —
inside the associated questions of selfhood related to texts of bliss, language assumes the pivotal
role of shaping and reifying losses to the extent that language becomes the ground on which
selfhood is formed and, in the case of Barthes’ bliss, dissolved.

Towards its end, Bluets considers the possibility of action through inaction by situating
Nelson as both writer and cultural consumer, making contact with both Barthes’ and Butler’s
formulations:

130. We cannot read the darkness. We cannot read it. It is a form
of madness, albeit a common one, that we try.

131. “I just don’t feel like you’re trying hard enough,” one friend
says to me. How can I tell her that not trying has become the whole
point, the whole plan?

132. That is to say: I have been trying to go limp in the face of my
heartache, as another friend says he does in the face of his anxiety.
Think of it as an act of civil disobedience, he says. Let the police peel you up.

133. I have been trying to place myself in a land of great sunshine, and abandon my will therewith. (51)

In this moment, Nelson structures herself at once as reader, listener, and hypothetical speaker. Here, Nelson occupies the role of Barthes’ consumer — first as foolish reader of the darkness by wrapping herself in with the reader via the pluralized “we,” and then as mute audience to her friends’ advice — and in doing so slips into what Roland Barthes describes as the consumer affect of “Drifting”: “Drifting occurs whenever I do not respect the whole, and whenever, by dint of seeming driven about by language’s illusions, seductions, and intimidations, like a cork on the waves, I remain motionless, pivoting on the intractable bliss that binds me to the text” (18). On the immediate level of language, the slippage between “try” and “trying” in propositions 130 and 131 demonstrates a sort of drift, although in affective terms it is also apparent that the conclusion of the above passage is a moment where the lyric “I,” as culturally- and socially-formed being, “remain[s] motionless, pivoting on the intractable bliss” that binds her to the simple act of trying. Nelson’s instinct to “abandon [her] will therewith” quite literally mimics the definition Barthes provides of drifting, illustrating how inherent in Barthes’ formulation is a sense of inertia. Bluets ties this inertia to depression and anxiety, configuring them as motionless affects which are exasperated by the constant movement of this text. In this moment, perhaps more than any other, the word “bliss” may seem particularly obtuse — it is this which necessitates a return to his definition, noting that bliss, in Barthes’ terms, is the simultaneous collapse and eruption of
the self in the process of reading or otherwise consuming/becoming audience of culture or language.

Beyond this interpretation, though, this passage provides a useful instance of a phenomenon in *Bluets* at large — the telescopic relation between the readerly response to *Bluets* and the responses and affects evident within the text as Nelson’s responses to her own acts of reading and consumption. In this way, Nelson herself comes to model a complicated, active readership — one which imitates (and is imitated by) a reading of *Bluets* itself. The coherence between this parallel sort of readership displayed and the mechanisms by which the text evaluates and explores the capacities of language is exactly what allows *Bluets* to serve as a site for an investigation into the processes that produce annotation and the interpretations which are made possible by these annotations. This parallelism revolves around Barthes: by tracking the ways in which Nelson exhibits and strays from the affects of the reader espoused in *The Pleasure of the Text*, it becomes possible to identify how language is taking hold and effecting change in *Bluets* — that is, the capacities of language come to exist not solely in abstract, theoretical terms, but immediately in *Bluets* as well.

The opening sentences of *Bluets* serve as a foundational introduction to the series of dualized phenomena identified above — the interplay between texts of pleasure and those of bliss, the positioning of Nelson as both producer and consumer, and the simultaneous function of language as declarative and performative. *Bluets* begins with something of a confession:

1. Suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with a color. Suppose I were to speak this as though it were a confession; suppose I shredded my napkin as we spoke. *It began slowly*. *An appreciation, an affinity. Then, one day, it became more serious.* (1)
This confession is inaugurated and obscured by the veil of a supposition (quite literally, as the text’s first word is “Suppose”), structuring a poetic/argumentative/narratological environment that is at once abstract and actual, straddling the Barthesian lines of pleasure and bliss by rendering the dissolution of selfhood as only ever hypothetical while nonetheless pinpointing the locus of this dissolution in having “fallen in love with a color.” The sustained subjunctive mood throughout this fragment perpetuates a sense of hypothesis throughout the text that follows, such that when, on the following page, Nelson first structures herself as a reader (granting us peculiar access to herself in the process of making meaning from another’s work) this vision of her as reader becomes similarly hypothetical, almost dissolved — a subject suspended in and tormented by bliss.

IV. Reading Across Readings; or, the Half and Half Again

With the aid of Bluets’ many citations, Nelson sustains such a readerly mood herself, which (in concert with the lyrical components of the text) comes to invite readers to adopt such a mood — a mood in the reader that comes to be sustained by the enumerative structure, complete with its many modes of slipping and tugging. In a double interview between Nelson and artist A. L. Steiner conducted for the magazine BOMB, Nelson and Steiner interview each other, swapping continuously the roles of consumer and producer. As a respondent to Steiner’s work, Nelson flags an inescapable mixture of “fictive performativity [...] and regular old autobiography,” reiterating an earlier claim that “creative work, in [her] experience, privileges performativity over fixity” (“Maggie Nelson” 75, 71). Nelson seems here to inhabit almost automatically a position of bliss with respect to others’ work, suggesting that there is something
of a disposition or a posture to Barthes’ bliss — that it is, above all else, a mood — which can nonetheless be induced by a text. Nelson’s simple investment in the selfhood that is forged through reading shines through when she considers various translations of one of Heraclitus’s famous aphorisms:

200. “You cannot step into the same river twice”—a heartening anthem, without a doubt. But really this is but one version of the fragment left behind by Heraclitus, who was justly nicknamed “The Riddler” or “The Obscure.” Other versions: “On those stepping into rivers staying the same other and other waters flow”; “We step and do not step into the same river; we are and we are not”; “You cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters and yet others, go flowing on.” It seems that something is staying the same here, but what?

201. I believe in the possibility—the inevitability, even—of a fresh self stepping into ever-fresh waters, as in the variant: “No man ever steps into the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man.” But I also sense something in Heraclitus’s fragment that allows for the possibility of a mouse shocking its snout on a hunk of electrified cheese over and over again in a kind of static eternity. (Nelson 80)

Perhaps my relationship with this moment of the text is stunted — as an adolescent, I shared a bedroom with my older brother, who had covered the walls in quotations he deemed inspirational, including the final instance of Heraclitus’s aphorism above, so these are, if you will, familiar waters for me — but perhaps this is also Nelson’s point: the text (here, both Heraclitus’s fragment and the river he references) is always in relation to the self, and any amount of drifting, bliss, or pleasure (and correlated loss) which emanates from this relation becomes folded into the self. This is also another instance of the telescopic phenomenon which haunts so much of Bluets, as Nelson is both reading and being read, working with a piece of text which is unabashedly about both how text changes its readers and how readers change their texts.
This is at hand in Nelson’s playful doubling in the word “static,” which simultaneously
announces an interminable stasis for one who neither changes nor is changed and also reifies the
“electrified” nature of text — and in the same stroke language — as something which refuses to
be handled passively.

Embedded in this is also the notion of revisitation as both a meaning- and self-making
process. In a nearly metaphysical sense, it is the act of revisitation that makes both the river and
its visitor new while preserving something, perhaps something ineffable. Nelson’s supposition
that “it seems that something is staying the same here, but what?” acknowledges this
phenomenon, advocating for the possibility that revisitation is an important process for
meaning-making (particularly with respect to a text) because in revisiting a text readers uncover
what it is that has changed and what has stayed the same, even if they are unequipped to
articulate what it is exactly. My annotations instantiate a similar record of revisitation,
intervening at this point of articulation: taken individually, they may serve as simple markers of
what gripped me in the text, but on a global level these layers of annotation become a record of
how my relationship with Bluets changed over time, giving me the ability to locate explicit
changes in such a shifting topography. They are more than this, too — they become a part of the

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3 This is what is at stake in Ann Reynolds’s essay “At the Jetty,” in which she chronicles her visit to Robert
Smithson’s famous Spiral Jetty after it had been submerged and subsequently reemerged, its constituent black stones
now whitened by salt. For Reynolds, the central comparison is between description and consumption, as her visit to
Spiral Jetty is her first in-person consumption experience with the piece, but not her first experience working with the
piece — she had written on it before and worked intensely with textual descriptions of it, as well as films and
images. Nonetheless, her emphasis on “the need to develop a narrative of one’s own experience of” a piece of art or
text is relevant to Bluets, as Nelson visits and revisits pieces of text from the same thinkers (such as Goethe,
Wittgenstein, and Williams), and I have visited and revisited Bluets. Reynolds stresses that “One is forced to invent
a story of one’s encounter, to create a fictional space for this experience to inhabit,” and in this way suggests that the
interpretive act is always filtered by this narrative; beyond this, though, Reynolds is working with a legible record of
this narrative via the discoloration of the rocks (Reynolds 74).
text (although still ancillary in many ways), shaping my contemporary ability to read and interpret *Bluets*.

Sam Anderson toys with this possibility in his essay “What I Really Want is Someone Rolling Around in the Text,” written for *The New York Times Magazine*: the thrust of his piece is that marginalia (what I have called annotations thus far) may prove to be the basis for a social form of reading which will emerge through the prominence of e-readers, but underneath this is the simple belief that writing in a text brings you closer to it. Anderson argues that writing in his texts is “a way to not just passively read but to fully enter a text, to collaborate with it, to mingle with an author on some kind of primary textual plane” — for my reading of *Bluets*, Anderson’s formulation suggests that writing in the text is a way to access the import of Nelson’s experiments in language (Anderson). These annotations become at once a basis for interpretation and an avenue into the exact capacities of language which are at stake and at work in *Bluets*.

Return now to fragments 130-133, already considered in terms of how they configure Barthes’ categories of bliss and pleasure and demonstrate a fundamental capacity of language to impact an individual’s ability to navigate depression and anxiety. I present now this same passage, with my annotations:

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4 Anderson’s work in “What I Really Want is Someone Rolling Around in the Text” comes in some ways as a response to H. J. Jackson’s book *Marginalia*, which takes a historical approach to the study of marginal notes. *Marginalia* details how the process of annotating texts proliferated in the nineteenth century (noting Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s practice of scrawling in the margins of his books and then circulating them as a likely origin point for contemporary annotative practices) and emphasizes that this practice was likely a social one intended to augment the reading experience (Jackson). Anderson intervenes by first lightly arguing that these annotative practices are, for the individual reader, an essential part of the meaning making process, and then supposing that the social side of these practices could see a renaissance with e-readers in a way that would allow individuals to recreate the sharing of annotations that Jackson heralds as the origin of modern marginalia. Accordingly, much of the available discourse takes more or less for granted the importance of annotations for the individual reader as a means of making a greater claim about how annotations can function as social objects in communities of readers.
Surely, the same textual interpretations are available: Nelson’s drifting as well as the image of language as the undergirding mechanism of resistance or compliance with respect to mental illness. But now, something more becomes evident — as if holding the text up to different lights, the different layers of annotation betray slightly different emphases and understandings. The annotations in lead are from my first reading, whereas the annotations in ink come from a second reading conducted several months later. These two layers privilege the same passages of text, with only one sentence marked in ink that is not marked in lead, but these two layers also invert each other: where I have underlined, I now bracket, and where I have bracketed I now underline. The focus shifts, displaying the very parallax I announced and erased in the margin elsewhere. In my initial reading, I underline the sentence “How can I tell her that not trying has become the whole point, the whole plan?” marking it as the crux of the passage for me, with brackets around the following fragment to suggest its relevance only in terms of the underlined sentence; but in the second reading, I merely bracket this former fragment, staging it in terms of the following underlined sentences. My reading has quivered, moved — I am no longer interested in “not
trying,” but rather in an act of “trying,” no matter how limp or disaffected it may be. This is, perhaps, a subtle shift in perspective, but it is also fundamental to the way language forms and affects categories of selfhood and mental, emotional wellbeing in terms of loss. By reading across my readings, something new becomes apparent, something which feels almost alive: amidst the text’s many movements and convolutions, I, the reader, begin to surface.

This practice of reading across readings expands naturally, perpetually — it becomes more process than practice, each layer of reading serving as something of a prism through which any interpretation is refracted. It is a subtle, nearly subterranean process, too; no matter how hard I try, I can never return to *Bluets* for the first time, so each reading (and correlated interpretation) is indelibly and sometimes undetectably marked by the presence of those which have come before and the possibility of those which may come afterwards. Certainly, my annotations serve as a nearly heavy-handed instance of this phenomenon, but it is a psychic one at large — I cannot forget what I recall, particularly when these remembrances are tied to the text, its language, and its codex. And so, in one way, I am helpless and my ability to read *Bluets* is perpetually compromised; but this helplessness is conditional, perspectival. It is a powerlessness born of an attempt to do what cannot be done — “it is a form of madness, albeit a common one, that we try.” It is here where “not trying has become the whole point, the whole plan.” In the one view, this process substantiates a loss — I have lost my ability to read *Bluets* for the first time, to produce unbiased interpretation — but, imagined differently, this loss becomes an opportunity, a chance to reinvigorate my reading, to make something new from something old. It becomes an occasion to grow.
Shortly before the conclusion of *Bluets*, Nelson remarks bluntly, blissfully, “if you truly become someone on whom nothing is lost, then loss will not be lost upon you, either” (85). This is a sentence I have bracketed in lead and underlined in ink, a moment that has changed and remained the same in turns between my readings. Nelson’s circular usage of the word “loss” here points back to something foundational about *Bluets*: it is a text which uses language to distract itself, corner itself, cleanse itself. Here, Nelson comes upon a brutal tautology. She arrives at a linguistic formulation that cannot be unraveled precisely *because* of its linguistic form. This is a sentence that revisits itself, completes its own circuit. It is a moment of undisguised clarity and meaning, the formalities of language in some ways shorn away so that there is only loss, there is only what remains; there is only the language stump.
Works Cited


Nelson, Maggie, and Evan Lavender-Smith. “The Fragment as a Unit of Prose Composition.”


Works Consulted


