

“Turning to a color at a particularly fraught moment” – Configuring the Affect of Grief in Colour and Form(s) in Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*

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What we know about grief: it, from a loss. This is largely all we know of grief. That loss might be material (your body I adored), sensual (the sight she once had), geographical-historical (the home he had to leave), ephemeral-ideational (the ideology they saw fail). This, too: the affect of grief is a uniquely painful suffering – (‘No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief, / More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring’), and it is painful because the lost thing was valued highly – wanted, needed; it sustained; it defined; it was loved.

– Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*

How can one articulate – see through – the burdensome experience of the loss of a loved person and the grief that ensues from that experience? is the crucial question that Maggie Nelson’s book *Bluets* (2009) poses and persistently recurs to. In an attempt to formulate the grief resulting from the painful absence of a lover, the book’s unnamed narrator turns to ‘blue’ – “the word and the

condition, the color and the act, [which] contrive to contain one another” (Gass 11). Appropriating genre conventions of the literary form of the prose poem, the book’s 240 hierarchically ordered propositions possess “poetic ambiguity” (Delville 137) and are yet driven by a narrative line (137). *Bluets’* propositions encapsulate the narrator’s exploration of broader

philosophical, cultural-historical, and scientific meanings of the colour blue as well as their subjective insight into the experience of heartbreak and suffering, which ultimately builds the book's overarching narrative structure.

Building on Eugenie Brinkema's theoretical conceptualisation of 'affects as forms,'¹ I argue that the personal grief of *Bluets'* narrator configures, dwells, and develops in *forms* – it materialises in blue objects, the engagement with other people's works and writings on the colour blue, and, crucially, *Bluets'* literary form itself. Departing from the most constitutive notion of 'affect' as an evasive yet socially relational and organising force that exists beyond emotion and arises from the encounter between bodies and objects (Seighworth and Gregg 1-2; Brinkema 24), I will close read *Bluets'* propositions for grief as a form of affect. Throughout this paper, my analysis of grief will be guided by the question "how it [the literary text] means, not just *what* it means" (Johnson 348). My methodological approach, thus,

entails a strong emphasis on *Bluets'* stylistic, poetic, and formal details put forth *in* and *through* the "close encounter[r]" (Gallop 17) with the literary text. In this paper, I will begin by offering a close analysis of how the intimate and inimitable grief that occurs from the experience of lost love manifests in forms in *Bluets'* prose poems. In consequently focusing on the affective functions that, in the propositions, the narrator ascribes to 'blue' as a physical phenomenon, I will examine how their grief materialises in formal structures such as light, line, and colour as exterior dimensions (Brinkema 37). Finally, I will turn to the question of how the affect of grief is inscribed in *Bluets'* literary form and informs the narrator's reflections on the possibilities of expressing their experience of grief by means of language.

Grief: Contours of an Affect

The loss of someone who was loved calls the grieving subject to turn to "[t]he 'essence' or the ephemeral, presumed moments of

¹ In her work *The Forms of the Affects*, Brinkema insists on an approach of close reading *affect* as plural (xii) and, thereby, emphasises the manifold *forms* of affect (xv). In turning to Brinkema's analysis of affect in the scope of this paper, I will primarily focus on grief as a singular affect that manifests in different forms (that is, various forms of grief).

absolute events and encounters of which repositories are now remiss of any archive or words" (85) to borrow from the apt words of Tina Chatterjee. Such memories which are at first interiorised by the grieving subject (85) function as referents that, in the continuing absence of the lost other, solidify in forms. Leaning on Roland Barthes' analysis of grief's untransformable dimension that takes shape in the undialectical visualisation of the lost other through the externalised structure of the photograph (91), Brinkema develops a rethinking of grief as a formal affect. Such a reconceptualisation of grief as form does not dismiss the psychological dimensions of interior grief altogether – rather, Brinkema insists on a theorisation of grief as *also* figuring as a formal affect that "inheres in material objects, [and] takes shape in an exteriority and formal structures bound up intimately with light" (76). Hence, in primarily close reading grief as a "textual and visual form" (116), grief protrudes as an undialectical presence that materially renders

the absence of a loved other or meaningful abstraction (57).

A configuration of grief as enduring in material objects and formal structures unfolds as a recurring theme in *Bluets'* propositions: in their quest to fathom the loss of a lover, the narrator's grief manifests in their devotion to the colour blue and the poetic undertaking to formulate its various meanings. For the narrator, grief's static structure exposes in blue's "non-relational" (76) physiological "presence" (*Bluets* 28):² "Over the years I have amassed countless blue stones, blue shards of glass, blue marbles, trampled blue photographs peeled off sidewalks, pieces of blue rubble from broken buildings" (*B* 69). However, the narrator's commitment to trace various nuances of blue in found objects, gifted tokens, paintings, landscapes, and the materiality of synonyms of blue is not a mere distraction from heartbreak. Rather, the ontological presence of the colour blue holds the "function of an affect" (Golovchenko 54): blue, the colour, stands in place of the once intimate but now absent lover and, thus, bears the affectivity of the narrator's grief. In this respect, the "community of blue" (58) conjured in the lines of *Bluets'* propositions represents the attempt to *form* an absence. Grief becomes "concrete" (Brinkema 97) in the

² Further references to *Bluets* are subsequently abbreviated as *B*.

The double bind of blue looms in its affective quality to equally produce desire and pain in the narrator; in other words, in the face of loss, blue evokes felt proximity and intense longing at the same time.



narrator's corporeal and, in the literary form of the propositions, metaphorical "gather[ing] [of] 'fragments of blue dense'" (B 68).

The narrator's affective attachment to the colour blue reflects the vain endeavour to trace in their love of blue "a related form of aggrandizement, to inflate a heartbreak into a sort of allegory" (B 75). In the course of the propositions, the narrator's love of blue and their memories of their lover shift and are persistently reformulated: at times, the sight of blue made the narrator "suddenly hopeful" (B 12), leading them to the conclusion that "for the moment, I can't think of any times that blue has caused me to despair" (B 13). Further into the text, as the narrator's meditations develop, the narrative about blue breaks: "And so we arrive at one instance, and then another, upon which blue delivered a measure of despair. But truth be told: I saw them as purple" (B 50-51). The double bind of blue looms in its affective quality to equally produce desire and pain in the narrator; in other words, in the face of the loss, blue evokes felt proximity and intense longing at the same time.

Early into the book, the narrator thus concedes: "So what could it be a symptom of, to start seeing colors – or, more oddly,

just one color – more acutely? Mania? Monomania? Hypomania? Shock? Love? Grief?" (B 12). In fact, grief's pain surfaces in light as becomes apparent in the narrator's allegorical recurrence to the complex physiological processes of colour vision in the book. Proposition 52, for instance, states:

[...] Fifteen days after we are born, we begin to discriminate between colors. For the rest of our lives, barring blunted or blinded sights, we find ourselves face-to-face with all these phenomena at once, and we call the whole shimmering mess 'color'. You might even say that it is the business of the eye to make colored forms out of what is essentially shimmering. This is how we 'get around' in the world. Some might also call it the source of our suffering. (B 20)

The ability to see and, consequently, *be affected by what can be seen* is inextricably linked to the formal structures of the narrator's grief. Yet, the attempt to transform visually perceived images of quotidian blues into poetic imagery dissolves into bleak metaphorical formulations ("How all of these formulations drain the blue right out of love and leave an ugly, pigmentless fish flapping on a cutting board on a kitchen counter." [B 18]). To distinguish between colours (thus, to feel love and desire for another person) implicates delusion which,

inevitably, leads to suffering. In fact, the colour blue builds the fabric of the propositions' material and imaginative reality (Lasky 364–65). Thus, the narrator's meditations on the colour blue reflect "association[s] that ha[ve] weight" (364) and denote "the formal force, the heavy, gravitational weightiness, of the affect [of grief]" (Brinkema 73):

135. [...] [...], it remains the case that to see blue in deeper and deeper saturation is eventually to move toward darkness.

144. [...] I have spent a lot of time staring at this [blue] core in my own 'dark chamber,' and I can testify that it provides an excellent example of how blue gives way to darkness—and then how, without warning, the darkness grows up into a cone of light. (B 52–56)

To see the colour blue intensely – in both a literal and figurative sense – is a gravitation towards darkness, a space where one is deprived of vision altogether. Hence, contained in materialised grief is the interminable stasis of the affect, its weightiness. As the narrator points out early into the text: "And what kind of madness is it anyway, to be in love with something *constitutionally incapable of loving you back?*" (B 15; emphasis added). Here, the narrator's introspection denotes the unproductiveness of the "untransformable dimension of

loss's pain" (Brinkema 75) that is perpetuated by formal grief. As the narrator's grief materialises in the presence of blue, blue objects embody forms of suffering – the lost lover remains unattainable. Crucially, such "non-relational" (76) forms of grief cannot induce change nor cure the subjective pain of the narrator's grief.

Blue Offerings and Limitations in Literary Form and Language

Bluets' propositions invoke the literary form of the prose poem. The propositions' appearance as literary fragments of paragraph length and the logic of their sentences suggest "the mode of prose" (Hetherington and Atherton 7). Simultaneously, the openness of the propositions' form bestows them a "poetically suggestive" (11) quality. Each of *Bluets'* propositions stands as a container that archives the narrator's articulations of loss, pain, and grief. Thus, allowing for associations, leaps, and gaps, the propositions engender as well as maintain a "productive uncertainty" (Jamison qtd. in Delville 139). The evasiveness already adherent to *Bluets'* form is reinforced by the narrator's recursive questioning of the possibilities and limitations of what can and cannot be articulated through language. In fact, from the beginning of the

book, the narrator figures their personal grief by means of the literary form and the use of language. Turning to Propositions 1 and 2, the narrator begins with a presupposition:

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. Then (looking into an empty teacup, its bottom stained with thin brown excrement coiled into the shape of a sea horse) it became somehow personal.

2. And so I fell in love with a color—in this case, the color blue—as if falling under a spell, a spell I fought to stay under and get out from under, in turns.

(B 1)

Read as a preamble, Propositions 1 and 2 frame *Bluets'* text as an expository "confession" (B 1) in which the narrator writes about their love of the colour blue which turns into an "allegory" (B 75) of working through the private grief induced by the loss of someone who was close. Each of *Bluets'* propositions, as Manuela Moser posits, inheres a hypothetical nature that engenders "conditionality" (119) as is fully disclosed by the narrator in Proposition 40: "I am trying to talk about what blue means, or what it means to me, apart from meaning"

(B 16). For the narrator, the attempt to write about loss and heartbreak might as well be a "form of aggrandizement" (B 75); thus, dispensing notions of the lyric tradition, the question of how — or, *if* — grief can be configured through the art form of poetry endures throughout the book.

The inherent resistance to ascribe their grief (and the colour blue) a singular ontological or phenomenological meaning is most immediately reflected in the narrator's recursive use of citation that is woven into the text's form. As Proposition 50 states, the narrator's personal inquiry is undergirded by the joint "confusion about what color is, where it is, or whether it is [which] persists despite thousands of years of prodding at the phenomenon" (B 19). Thus, in the evolution of *Bluets'* propositions, the narrator takes up lines from the writings of Goethe, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Getrude Stein, and others who, from different perspectives, have engaged with the phenomenon of colour. Leaning on the citational style, the narrator freely links their own meditations to various historical discourses and theories about the colour blue and thereby never conclusively resolves what the meaning of blue is for them. The prose poem's capacity to forge elements of the "lyrical and analytical, private

and public" (Delville 137) is central to the narrator's progressional figuring and (re)configuring of their grief. Precisely by means of *Bluets'* prose poems' versatile modes and their ability to be in dialogical play, an answer to the question *why blue* remains inexplicable and thus, the narrator's painful suffering continuous.

Bluets' propositions are thus bound in uncertainty and contradiction as, in the course of the narrator's exploration of their experience of heartbreak, notions of veracity and truth are invariably complicated. Detached from conventional philosophical definitions of propositions as "primary bearers of truth-value" (McGrath and Frank unp.), the propositions in Nelson's work are "a recording of the author's own affective journey and relationship with blue, a limit that is compounded by the limitations of language" (Golovchenko 60); the narrator, therefore, steadily reminds the reader of the intimately confessional nature of their poetic project: "I know all about this passing for truth. At times I think it quite possible that it lies, as if a sleight of hand, at the heart of all my writing" (B 48). As Michelle Dicoski rightly states, retained in each proposition is "the movement of a mind as it follows a

line (or lines, or wild associations) of thinking" (7). In the process of conjuring a tenable formulation of their grief, the narrator works the modes of "association, digression and meditation" (3) into *Bluets'* form. As such, the propositions appear as "carriers of affective content" (Gibbs 5): they yield to the continual changes caused by the intensities and development of a grief that, in turn, is itself is configured and reconfigured by means of the literary form's capacities.

The versatility of the propositions' prose-poetic form, most apparent in each fragment's permeability and capability for osmosis (Caldwell and Hardwick 2), allows for the possibility to both contain and liberate affect. Thus, while the lineated prosaic form of the propositions suggests the continuity and progression of a narrative, they, in fact, deny the reader closure (Hetherington and Atherton 8). *Bluets'* propositions are characterised by their "reach outwards" (8), most noticeable in the narrator's shifting associations about the colour blue (which, again, allegorise as articulations of their grief). The book's quality as a "multivocal text" (Moser 159) – distinctly marked by the narrator's dwelling upon others' thinking, then, in other instances, the sudden

In *Blues*, the affect of grief takes on formal properties: it dwells in the ontological presence of the colour blue, thus, relies in material objects, and, ultimately, is inscribed in the literary form of the work itself. Fundamentally, grief operates as the book's organising force—the narrator's grief gives form to the narrator's philosophical and existential inquiries through which they explore the greater question of how to bear the painful absence of someone close and loved.



displacement and disengagement from previously drawn-upon ideas — allows the narrator to avoid a definite answer to their grief. In closely observing how, in an effort to lure its female counterpart, the male bowerbird “collect[s] and arrange[s] blue objects” (B 27), the narrator infers an analogy to the text’s form and its diction:

70. Am I trying, with these ‘propositions,’ to build some kind of bower?—But surely this would be a mistake. For starters, *words do not look like the things they designate* (Maurice Merleau-Ponty). (B 28)

The drawn analogy is a reiteration that, in the process of the narrator’s grappling with grief, the destination of their personal quest is unknown to them and, after all, closure as such is not substantial to the nature of their project. Hence, both the *Bluets*’ distinct literary form and its citational mode operate as means that uphold the inherent uncertainty of the narrator’s affective inquiry. It is a demonstration of the text’s conditionality inaugurated at the beginning of the book: there is no formula for their grief; or, a consolation for loss and grief might neither be found in words nor form.

Ultimately, towards the end of the book, the narrator explicitly delineates the exhaustive

possibilities of their poetic quest to formulate — in fact, *form* — their grief: in the poetic process of labouring over their devotion to the colour blue, writing serves “pharmakon” (B 84) and “mordant” (B 84) to preserve memories of their lost lover and the emotional pain resulting from their absence at once. Alluding to the Wittgensteinian concern that “[t]here are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words” (250), the narrator points out *Bluets*’ main philosophical and linguistic grappling: the semantics of grief cannot — perhaps, does not need to — be articulated through words. Yet, it is only in and through the process of formulating their grief that, in the final propositions, the narrator can stage the outcome of their poetic inquiry: “an anemia that seems to stand in direct proportion to my zeal” (B 91). The sobering awakening from grief, thus, eventually leaving them “stumb[ing] upon a pile of thin blue gels scattered on the stage long after the show has come and gone; the set, struck” (B 91).

After-Grief

In *Bluets*, the affect of grief takes on formal properties: it dwells in the ontological presence of the colour blue, thus reifies in material objects, and, ultimately, is inscribed in the literary form

of the work itself. Fundamentally, grief operates as the book's organising force – the narrator's grief gives form to the narrator's philosophical and existential inquiries through which they explore the greater question of how to bear the painful absence of someone close and loved. At the same time, *Bluets'* propositional nature and prose-poetic quality is itself a form that models and archives the narrator's grief. In a word, grief touches on the book and the book touches on grief.

In the narrator's reckoning with loss and grief, form serves to fill an absence; but the state of *Bluets'* narrator's grief (its form) does not change: "Everything changed. Well, what changed? [...] 'I grieve that grieve can teach me nothing,' wrote Emerson" (B 88). The grief emerging from intimate loss is ineffable – just as the prose poem, in its form, refuses closure, grief's contours remain unresolved. As such, the deeper insight that 'blue's' entity – as the phenomenon that carries both the narrator's devotion and grief – cannot be articulated poses the phenomenological and ontological problem of 'blue' that persistently resurfaces throughout the book. Hence, blue does not satiate the yearning for who is deeply desired; or, as the two closing propositions reveal, 'blue' is not sustaining:

239. But now you are talking as if love were a consolation. Simone Weil warned otherwise. 'Love is not consolation,' she wrote. 'It is light.'

240. All right then, let me try to rephrase. When I was alive, I aimed to be a student not of longing but of light. (B 95)

Ultimately, grief resists form and as such, it is "[t]he force of grief's gravity" (Brinkema 109) that pulls the narrator towards the voidness of glaring white light. To see blue too intensely leads to an obstruction of vision, for, as the narrator already forestalls in Proposition 144, a glare occurs when you stare at the blue core of a flame for too long (B 56). As such, *After-grief* is a negative space empty of formal structures and, thus, a figuration of something that no longer is. However, it is only in the disengaged state of *after-grief* that the narrator finds an articulation of what they have been trying to fathom in the progression of the book's 240 propositions: their love was blindness.

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