

Maggie Nelson  
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Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* is a work of creative nonfiction and memoir that explores, from a gripping first-person perspective, some of the most pressing questions that animate contemporary feminist philosophy. The thinkers that Nelson draws into conversation--with one another and with herself--include Gilles Deleuze, Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Lee Edelman, Jane Gallop, Sara Ahmed, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Nelson also engages with a range of poets, artists, and cultural theorists, including Eileen Myles, Catherine Opie, C. A. Conrad, and Annie Sprinkle. *The Argonauts* exposes conceits of academic work that usually go unmarked, dramatizing the acts of teaching and writing as affectively charged. It draws out the philosophical ramifications of our affections--political and aesthetic as well as erotic--and situates them in the pressing debates of current feminist and queer theory.

"Maggie Nelson can do as much with Wittgenstein in one paragraph," a philosophy friend commented recently, "as Stanley Cavell can do in an entire book." Since this friend is an ardent fan of Cavell--fan in the sense that Kristie Dotson gives it--this comment is no insult to Cavell's philosophical writings. Rather, it's a testament to the conceptual vigor and craft of Nelson's ninth book, *The Argonauts*. By describing philosophy as a set of fandoms, Dotson foregrounds the way in which the discipline itself emerges through taste, preference, and preferential treatment (Dotson 2014): fandoms determine who is represented on syllabi and in journals, for example, and they reinforce presumptions about which methods best exemplify the philosophical. Fandoms reflect the fact that, as Nelson writes, sometimes rigor tips into ardor (62), and ardor is never neutral. What seems so striking about Dotson's proposal that we approach philosophy as fandom is that it calls attention to the exclusionary work effected by some fandoms at the expense of others. As Dotson's analysis of the discipline reveals, some thinkers count as

philosophically canonical, and others do not; some problems reflect abiding philosophical concerns, while others are relegated to a status that lacks disciplinary legitimation.

A question frequently posed to those whose fandoms differ from the questioner's own loyalties discloses the vested interests that often underlie such presumptions of legitimacy: "How is this (paper, dissertation, curricular choice, or review) *philosophy*" (Dotson 2012)? When philosophy is assessed in terms of fandoms, we shift the burden *to* the discipline to be responsible for the justifications that it demands (Allen 1998; Dotson 2012). We also solicit ways of inhabiting our fandoms that affirm the differences among our philosophies, rather than require others to coincide with our own definitions of the legitimate; as Nelson might put it, this is a call to pluralize as well as to specify.

The import of one's fandom is at the heart of *The Argonauts*. And as Nelson's reflections disclose with vivid details, this import bears directly on how we approach philosophy, how we live out our political ideals, and how we navigate the intimate, erotic aspects of our daily lives. *The Argonauts* takes on the exclusionary tendencies of established fandoms, exploring one challenge of legitimation in particular: how is this (political action, erotic expression, or identity-claim) *queer*? Like the question that mandates prescribed methods for projects that seek legitimation as "philosophy," this question often mandates highly scripted approaches to politics, erotic proclivities, and theoretical labor itself. Like Dotson's analysis of the question "how is this paper philosophy?," Nelson's *The Argonauts* can be read as a sustained inquiry into the preoccupations of the legitimately queer. From differing responses to marriage and reproduction to tensions surrounding poetics and aesthetics, Nelson stages the predicaments of queer life and queer theory--all the while dramatizing the humor, fallibility, and hapless love that make our fandoms so absorbing, if also at times unfortunate.

These predicaments will likely resonate with many *Hypatia* readers and their fan-affiliations. Indeed, part of the joy of reading *The Argonauts* for me was imagining that Nelson's bookshelves look so much like mine; our fandoms overlap closely. Consider how the clash of the feminist with the queer, for example, necessitates grappling with the nature of normativity itself, especially in relation to the lived expressions of gender, sex, and erotic life. Nelson shares a recollection about watching a movie dedicated to "the queerest of the queer," a locution that dramatizes the aspirations of much queer critique. Reflecting on the film's own depictions of queer sex, Nelson's partner Harry wonders whether the category of "woman" could be capacious enough to include the cock? But if the phallic is always pushing its way back into the room, Nelson responds, how do we make space for the nonphallic (63)?

These are political questions, signaling longstanding clashes like those between lesbian separatism and queer resistance. Their ongoing relevance is recognizable in clashes like those between same-sex marriage proponents and those who call out the homonormativity of institutionalized queer relations. In a series of compelling anecdotes, Nelson describes the experience of living in California at a time when pro-Prop 8 signs on suburban lawns depict "stick figures indefatigably rejoicing" (24). She and her partner Harry Dodge decide to get married quickly, before Prop 8 passed, "reversing the

conditions of our felicity" (25). "Poor marriage!" she sighs. "Off we went to kill it (unforgivable). Or reinforce it (unforgivable)" (24).

These are also philosophical questions, ones that *The Argonauts* elaborates from its very opening reflections on Wittgenstein. Can we empty out our categories and defetishize our icons, Nelson asks, and still construct the kinds of abstractions that let us deploy productive critique? To what extent are categories themselves (categories like "lesbian," "trans," or "female") at odds with the singularity of desire, flight, and experience (9, 53)? Nonconformity and radicality can be sources of exclusion as well as resources for emancipation (14). And so, Nelson asks, if exclusions wrought in the name of queer life prompt new exclusions, how sustainable *is* the very "binary of normative/transgressive" (74)?

*The Argonauts* traces many incarnations of this binary: the opposition of the mother with the writer, for example, and the feminine with the queer. By bringing such seeming impasses to life, Nelson proffers insights into philosophy and feminism that are, at least to this reader, sorely needed by our discipline. (Are there binaries that subtend the exclusions that Dotson's analysis examines with such precision? When a paper is deemed legitimately "philosophical," does its fit with disciplinary norms unwittingly reinforce the unfit of others? Can we queer philosophy and undercut such dynamics?) Animating the lived labor of conceptual work, Nelson opens up its perversities and pleasures, as well as the risk posed by representation itself.

It's this insistence that the personal and the theoretical co-implicate that seems especially significant for philosophy and its disciplinary woes. If our methods diverge, it might simply be because "our perversities are not compatible." This phrase, one that Nelson uses to describe erotic as well as political differences (27), is one that foregrounds the essentially *specific* nature of our fandom-love, while making space for the happy coexistence of differing fandoms.

*The Argonauts* is replete with vivid portraits of academics--Jane Gallop, "droopy-eyed and louche in a way that I liked, and had that bad but endearing style that so many academics have--kind of stuck in the '80s, feather earrings, and so on" (40); Nelson's own teacher, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, whose mantra--"to pluralize and specify"--suffuses the book's reflections (62). We encounter figures that *Hypatia* readers will recognize from our own conference-going adventures: those acolytes who meditate on Self and Other, while bowing "at the feet of yet another great white man pontificating from the podium, just as we've done for centuries" (54).

There's an engrossing anecdote about Nelson's undergraduate professor Christina Crosby, "radiant and elegant and butch, not stone and not soft" (58), who vexed her students with her Foucault-inflected queerness. One day, Crosby's students rebelled, demanding identitarian-labels from everyone. "[A]s if in a tier of hell," Nelson writes, Crosby "was being handed an index card and a Sharpie and being told to squeeze a Homeric epithet on it. Defeated, she wrote, 'Lover of Babe.' (Babe was her dog, a mischievous white lab)"

(59). Such stories capture the comedic drama of intellectual work, suffused so often with longing (like the longing that one's teachers out themselves, if only on an index card).

Nelson paints a stunning, if excruciating, portrait of a public lecture in which Rosalind Krauss goes "in for the kill" in response to a presentation by Jane Gallop. Nelson muses that "the tacit undercurrent of [Krauss's] argument, as I felt it, was that Gallop's maternity had rotted her mind--besotted it with the narcissism that makes one think that an utterly ordinary experience shared by countless others is somehow unique, or uniquely interesting" (41). The perversities of these two thinkers were incompatible, Nelson concludes, at least on this occasion. But this was a scene in which differing stances on the legitimacy of maternal femininity as a theme for intellectual work crossed over into shaming. "In the face of such shaming," Nelson writes, "I felt no choice. I stood with Gallop" (42).

To be a fan is to crave intimacy with a thinker or set of thinkers. This intimacy gets played out in different ways. It's possible to be overly infatuated, Nelson points out, with "overarching concepts or figures," such that we fall into lyrical waxing and end up overly simplifying the specifics of a situation (45). Just as Winnicott accused Freud of annihilating nuance because he was so intoxicated with theoretical concepts, Nelson notes (68), we might find this same tendency in writers who attempt to pay homage to a beloved in their writing (Nelson's examples are Wayne Koestenbaum and Derrida, as well as herself). She admits that "the older I get, the more fearful I become of this nothingness, this waxing lyrical about those I love the most" (46).

This fear becomes all the more warranted, Nelson suggests, when the intensity of our need to be understood distorts our positions (82). And it's this need that *The Argonauts* renders in especially compassionate, and sometimes stern, terms. It might well be, Nelson admits, that one writes the same book, over and over again, "not because one is stupid or obstinate or incapable of change, but because such revisitations constitute a life" (112). This is one of the book's insights that holds particular import for philosophers and other academics in the humanities. Citing Deleuze and Parnet's *Dialogues II*, Nelson asks, "What other reason is there for writing than . . . to be traitor to writing" (97-98)? If we meet ourselves in our own writing projects, writing the same book over and over, what betrayals are we signing up for? If we take up a mantra like "pluralize and specify," what kind of work are we performing on ourselves, as well as our fandoms, when we write?

The title of Nelson's book originates with Roland Barthes. As Barthes describes it, the *Argo* is a boat whose parts are renewed over time, even as its name remains the same. This relation between shifting elements and constancy, Nelson suggests, is one that distinguishes the work of language, as well as that of eros and love: "the very task of love and language is to give one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new" (5). It also distinguishes the work of selfhood (95), and the endeavors of queerness itself. Sedgwick, Nelson explains, wanted the term *queer* to be a kind of placeholder, "a nominative, like *Argo*, willing to designate molten or shifting parts, a means of asserting while also giving the slip" (29).

This interplay of renewal with the placeholder proffers an existential and pragmatic way to engage with the query, "Is this (project, method, or choice) queer?" By calling out names as nominatives for political, aesthetic, and erotic aspirations, Nelson makes the case for the *lived* expressions of legitimacy. "Words change depending on who speaks them," she writes; "there is no cure. The answer isn't just to introduce new words (*boi, cis-gendered, andro-fag*) and then set out to reify their meanings. . . . One must also become alert to the possible uses, possible contexts, the wings with which each word can fly" (8). Words specify, but their articulations pluralize, and this dynamic lets us witness the challenge inherent in any fandom project. When we enact our own intellectual work, for example, are we miming already established conventions, or are we opening up the possibility of radical rethinking? (And, as Nelson queries, "How can you tell; or rather, who's to tell?" [14].)

If the familiar binary of the transgressive and the normative is no longer sustainable, then we are hailed to new relationships to norms. We need to make choices about what placeholders to defend--and what kinds of renewals to solicit. There's a wonderful debate that runs throughout *The Argonauts* between Nelson and her partner Harry about whether language itself stands up to scrutiny as a reliable placeholder. Is queer proliferation rendered viable through the work of sense-making, assertion, and prose, as Nelson suggests, or does such work forsake the wildness of art and queer life, as Harry argues (52)? Assimilation or revolution; nonviolence or staying freaky (81)? Cast in the context of an unfolding love affair, these differing perspectives remind us of how intimate philosophical questions about normativity really are. As Nelson discloses in an opening passage of the book, there are special challenges to navigating the norms of gender when our placeholders run up against the particularity of a beloved. Instead of deploying gendered pronouns to refer to her new lover, Nelson explains, "I want the you no one else can see, the you so close the third person need never apply" (7).

This tender refusal of the third person invites us each to ponder the call of the specific. In the course of the book, as she bears witness to her partner's transition, including surgery, Nelson draws out the specificity of gender, especially in terms of the words and narratives we deploy to signal sexed differences. For some, Nelson points out, mainstream stories are adequate for the specificity of lived experience, like stories about leaving one gender behind for another or rejecting all state-granted gender assignments (53). But for others, more creative and open stories are vital.

And so how free are we to experiment with language, love, and other placeholders? After all, even in the womb, Nelson explains, her son Iggy is asked to perform in gendered ways. But Nelson's own philosophy includes "an outsized faith in articulation itself as its own form of protection" (123). This faith legitimates claims such as "nothing you say can fuck up the space for God" (3), and it testifies to the very project of a book like *The Argonauts*. But given that, although articulations are specific, they always run the risk of generalization, this suggestion that faith be placed in aesthetic expression runs up against--in vibrant, visceral ways--the violence of exclusion.

And this tension speaks directly to the concerns of many feminist philosophers. Emerging philosophical interest in maternity (LaChance Adams and Lundquist, 2012), for example, resonates with another query pursued by *The Argonauts*: is pregnancy inherently heteronormative? Pointing to the presumed opposition of queerness and procreation ("or, to put a finer edge on it, maternity"), Nelson asks whether this opposition reflects a reactionary embrace of how things have shaken down for queers or the mark of an ontological truth. "As more queers have kids," she asks, "will the presumed opposition simply wither away? Will you miss it?" (13).

I am caught by this question, posed early in *The Argonauts* and dramatized throughout. Nelson assumes rightly, at least in my case, that her readers bring their own presumptions to bear upon the question of what is legitimately queer. Such presumptions likely bear witness to our own fandoms; it matters what theorists we are attributing our insights to. In the book, Nelson juxtaposes Lee Edelman (deftly assessed as proffering the punk allure of no future) with Gallop and other queer mothers, including Nelson herself. Contrasting a friend's slogan, "don't produce and don't reproduce," with a remarkable depiction of her own birthing experience, Nelson proposes that there *is* no re-production, only production: another lovely occasion of proliferation with specificity.

But I wonder how this proposal would shift if Nelson turned to Donna Haraway, particularly in terms of Haraway's slogan for queer resistance: "Make Kin Not Babies" (Haraway 2015, 10). In some ways, this slogan affirms the amplified, cross-species family-making that Nelson, too, invokes. In a poignant reflection on an art installation by A. L. Steiner, *Puppies and Babies*, Nelson describes a scene of interspecies love: "this orgy of adoration is clearly open to anyone who wants to play. Indeed, one of the gifts of genderqueer family making--and animal loving--is the revelation of caretaking as detachable from--and attachable to--any gender, any sentient being" (72).

Haraway's slogan is an ecological cry for nonnatal affiliation, however. It disallows the conflation of kinship with reproduction because of the horrors of global devastation; it invokes a limit, one that necessitates experiments with new, nonreproductive forms of kinship. *The Argonauts* is a glorious, conceptually precise exploration of queer life. Its proposal that "no one set of practices or relations has the monopoly on the so-called radical, or the so-called normative" (73) is a provocative response to those who sync legitimacy with exclusionary boundaries. If thinkers like Haraway, in turn, draw out the lived import of this proposal's overly inclusive scope, then such tensions seem exactly in line with the spirit of Nelson's project.

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