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IN THE MARGINS WITH THE ARGONAUTS

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I read Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* for the first time on a Kindle App on my android phone and was transfixed by what publicity materials called its "genre-bending" experimentation with "autotheory." Then a friend told me that Kindle had dismembered the book by eliminating its experimental dimensions in accordance with standard Kindle conventions. Read the print version they insisted or you will miss the full force of Nelson's autotheoretical punch. I followed their instructions and am intrigued by the difference between the page and digital versions, especially if we consider that interpretative practice does not stop at the *meaning* of the words that appear on the page – or screen. The visual orchestration of the text matters, in both aesthetic and ideological terms. What, then, should I make of the fact that my Kindle eliminates the paperback's use of the outer margin of the page, that space in which Nelson quite literally drops the name of many of the theorists, cultural warriors, friends, and lovers she quotes? The names dazzle: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, D.W. Winnicott, Lee Edelman, Sara Ahmed, Leo Bersani, Adam Phillips, Paul Preciado, Eileen Myles, Harry Dodge. Is it true – or nearly true, or significant even if not true – that I am now the reader of two different if identically titled books, one more authentic than the other? Is my friend correct that the Kindle version does a certain violence to *The Argonauts*, "assassinating" the theory side of Nelson's genre-bending investment in bringing academic discourses into a first-person memoir about sodomitical motherhood, domestic normativities, and embodied

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IN THE MARGINS WITH *THE ARGONAUTS*

transformations and hence that its *Argonauts* is merely a poor imitation of the real thing? Or are there times when charting a difference between things, even things purportedly identical to one another, requires attention to how each thing operates on its own, without adjudication? Can something be different from *but remain itself*? Is *The Argonauts* without references in the margins *The Argonauts* nonetheless? These are my animating questions.

To be sure, such questions might strike readers of *The Argonauts*, in paperback or not, as aiming in the wrong direction. After all, the title of Nelson's book goes a long way in assuring us that she holds no warrant for

dutiful replication as the key to the force or value of meaning. “A day or two after my love pronouncement,” Nelson writes to her lover Harry Dodge, “I sent you the passage from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* in which Barthes describes how the subject who utters the phrase ‘I love you’ is like ‘the Argonaut renewing his ship during its route without changing its name’” (5). As Monica Pearl discusses in this issue, the use of Barthes establishes Nelson’s engagement with “a paradox of identity” – an engagement that is about content and form as much as the norms attending love, family, and social attachment (this issue 199). By reading the author’s work as akin to the labor required to keep the *Argo* afloat, Pearl parses the different ways in which Nelson not only deconstructs the generic conventions of memoir and academic prose but remakes them as well. Multiple voices appear and disappear as Nelson integrates words and phrases from numerous thinkers into the text, often without attribution, thereby referencing while upending the formal practice of academic legitimization. Memoir’s traditional narrative arc is similarly disassembled as *The Argonauts*, properly speaking, is “not a story,” as Pearl writes, at least not in the “old fashioned” sense that provides “a beginning, middle, and end” (this issue 200). Instead, *The Argonauts*’ narrative desire takes shape in episodic terms, more as a performative assemblage of potentially interchangeable parts than as a commitment to a knowing destination. In her contribution here, Kaye Mitchell links such formal transgressions to the “ethics of vulnerability” that pervades the text – an ethics that arises from Nelson’s risky confrontation with sovereignty as self-infatuation and protection (this issue 194). In all these ways, the performance of the text conjures the work of the title, designating the author as an Argonaut who restores and rebuilds the world beneath her feet. Love, marriage, pregnancy: yes, but not with the affective underbelly of conservative ideology and its gendered regulation; autobiography, academic criticism: yes, but demonstrably oriented toward interlocution not individual experience as the sole means and measure of queer survival and repair.

That this interlocution is crucially staked to *The Argonauts*’ frequent use of quotations is not in dispute. In fact, my Kindle-without-marginal-references offers its readers ample engagement with the critical theorists, philosophers, and cultural warriors that appear in the list above. Wittgenstein comes first, in the second paragraph. “Before we met,” Nelson writes in reference to Harry’s counter belief in language as a primal scene of violence, “I had spent a lifetime devoted to Wittgenstein’s idea that the inexpressible is contained – inexpressibly! – in the expressed” (location 32–33). Shortly thereafter, Nelson gives us Thomas Jefferson and beyond him Roland Barthes who is used to introduce the book’s title before reappearing again as the segue to the fragment of a poem by Michael Ondaatje (location 44; 56; 68). Multiple swipes later we encounter Cherríe Moraga, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Karen Finley, Pussy Riot: all offered in a rush of appreciation at location 1006 for their refusal to follow Rita Mae Brown’s demand that to “join the movement” feminists must “abandon their children” (location 1066). Beyond this is Adam Phillips: “*The self without sympathetic attachments is either a fiction or a lunatic*” (location 1367). And throughout the e-book, twenty-eight times by my Kindle’s search count, the conversation is drawn to Eve Sedgwick, whose appetite for the simplicity of analytical reduction – as in Axiom 1: “*People are different from each another*” – is central to Nelson’s claim that “the great invitation of Sedgwick’s work [...] is to ‘pluralize and specify’” (location 989; 835). As the typography of these quotes suggests, the Kindle duplicates the paperback’s use of italics to indicate direct quotation. Here’s Butler, via Nelson: “*Performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms to force them to resignify*” (location 195; p. 15). Or Nelson recalling a barb she is unable to forget: “*Wow, my friend said, filling [the cup] up. I’ve never seen anything so heteronormative in my life*” (location 159; p. 13). There’s even Nelson on Nelson: “*You’ve punctured my solitude, I told you*” (location 56; p. 5). When it comes to

interlocution, then, all is not quiet on the Kindle screen, no matter its technological deficiency in replicating the paperback's marginal citations.

The e-book and paperback are most in sync when it comes to the visual performance of the paragraph, which always appears in singular form, a little island of text differentiated from the others by the unused space that surrounds it. No paragraph is indented. All are typographically justified. Some are simply one sentence long; others take up more than half of the page or screen. In every case, the blank space separating paragraphs is composed of a single unused line or two, never more. The double line enacts the deeper visual cut by indicating a transition, sometimes temporal, sometimes topical, often both. The separation of paragraphs, the justification, the lack of indentation: these formal characteristics replay the complexity of sameness and difference at stake in the story of the *Argo*, generating pages and screens that conform to compositional rules while remaining distinct from those that precede or follow. Unique but the same. To be sure, this description gives priority to the perspective of the paragraph by conceiving of the space around it as blank or, in language more ideologically weighted, as empty. Such a description prompts a question about relations of dependency within the visual order: are page and screen the background against which the *Argo*'s parts move, or are they part of the *Argo*'s moving parts? If, as we might suspect, *The Argonauts*' answer is that dependency is always a two-way street, then the paragraph, as visual unit, is at once anchored and unmoored, *embedded* in the page or *projected* onto the screen as much as floating over and above them. None of this is to say that my friend suffers from misplaced enthusiasm for the paperback – on that score I prefer not to judge. My point is rather that the e-book is no second-rate knockoff; its digital mode of reproduction has the capacity to keep visual pace with several of the key features (interlocution, narrative disassemblage) of autotheory's formal intervention.

What, then, of the main divergence – the paperback's active margins and the citations

that land there? The simplest reading would engage them as mere space-saving shorthand, thereby avoiding the question of whether the reduction of reference to proper names mocks or honors the authority we grant by calling them "citations." Nowhere in the book, let's remember, are readers provided with comprehensive bibliographical information. A more celebratory reading might approach the paper margins in graphic terms, much like graffiti, which values property transgression as a practice of everyday aesthetic intervention – in this case, graffiti in minimalist form. What you see is where the meaning lives. Still other readings might traffic more fully in the psychic consequences of ambivalence, finding the use of the margins both experimental *and* pretentious. How many canonical figures does it take before readers are certain that *The Argonauts* is both learned and smart? And once readers know this, are they – are we – more firmly identified with the author's quest to make critical sense of quotidian desires or overcome by insecurity if not alienation that the reading list is too unwieldy for anyone not in graduate school? Jackie Stacey's contribution to this issue offers one fascinating encounter with these questions as she follows her own readerly resistance by attending to the book's meditations on Winnicott and maternal attachments. Her point, in the end, is that Nelson's expectations for the reader are not as deeply tied to bibliographic competency as theory devotees might like, as the psychic implications of all social relations is that they cannot *not fail*. Other readers – "*People are different from each another*" – have wondered about the exclusions that Nelson's genealogies inscribe. In this issue, Sophie Mayer identifies the two that concern her the most: the citational absence of feminist/queer of color ruminations on maternity and the excision of the story of Medea, herself a passenger on the *Argo* whose mothering, let's just say, fell far short of Winnicott's standard of being "good enough." In Mayer's analysis, these absent genealogies offer limit cases for exploring the raced and classed implications of "kin-making," demonstrating how much messier sodomitical motherhood might be if

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race and class were figured more centrally in the identity conundrums that *The Argonauts* inhabits and explores.

Whether cast as negotiation borne of readerly discontent or in the mode of critique as political supplement, both Stacey and Mayer demonstrate that there is more to be said about the inner logics and interpretative effects of *The Argonauts*' genre transgressions. How, then, might we discern with some kind of precision what the margins perform in the visual economy of the paperback book? To students in my queer theory course last semester, I paired this question with news of my Kindle's evacuations to encourage them to approach *The Argonauts* as budding queer theoretical detectives. Initially they took this as a command to discover the rule that governed when the space of the margin was used. Each time someone thought they "had" it – i.e., "Nelson always posts a name in the margin when she quotes without clear attribution" – another Sherlock would joyfully offer up the negating example, stoking the hunt and frustrating it at once. We were especially perplexed about the text's orientation toward Eve Sedgwick, arguably its most important queer theorist. She is the only author who appears in marginal reference at first mention without a first name – as, simply, "Sedgwick" (74). Notably, this comes forty-six pages after Nelson first discusses Sedgwick's significance in reframing the political capacity and personal force of the concept "queer" (28). "She wanted the term," Nelson writes, "to be a perpetual excitement, 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). Everyone else who enters the margins, even those with previous appearances in the main text, are initially given full nomination: Ludwig Wittgenstein (4), Eileen Myles (11), Judith Butler (14), Leo Bersani (26), Ralph Waldo Emerson (33), D.W. Winnicott (37), Luce Irigaray (38), Lucille Clifton (53), Michel Foucault (64), Monique Wittig (98). There is only one exception: Harry Dodge, who is cited in the margins only as "Harry" and only in the final pages of the

book (129; 131; 133). In addition, Eileen Myles never appears simply as "Myles" but is referenced instead with her full name (11; 97).

Are these "irregularities" or measured practices of intimacy creative instances of authorial design or a game plan gone awry? Or might it be the case that there was never a defined plan and hence that no rule has been undermined? Or perhaps we should raise our cynicism a level and consider whether disrupting the reader's desire for a rule is the operative rule? In a book that opens by foregrounding the grammar of gender rules (or should I say the rules of gendered grammar?), the quest to answer these questions may seem inconsequential, especially in light of the larger political stakes that attend *The Argonauts*' deconstructive and reparative ethics. But these questions have a certain necessary inflection when reframed by what I consider the routinely unasked question: what is the relationship between the authorial figure, Maggie Nelson, and the narrator who speaks in the book *as* her? I know this question cuts against what is widely heralded as the book's most important achievement which lies in the power and pleasure it delivers by bringing theory down to earth – an achievement that casts *The Argonauts*' experiment in form as most successful from the auto side of its genre transgressions. To be sure, there is evidence in the text to support this contention, best represented by Nelson's last-minute rejection of the universalizing presumptions of theory. Quoting Adam Phillips and Leo Bersani as preamble to the book's concluding lines, she ruminates on what it means that living, much like thinking and loving – or narrative itself – inevitably comes to an end: "*the joke of evolution is that it is a teleology without a point, that we, like all animals, are a project that issues in nothing*" (143). "But is there really such a thing as nothing?," Nelson asks as she brings everyday intimacies close: "I don't know. I know we're still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our care, its ongoing song" (ibid.). With this use of rhyme, the only in the book, *The Argonauts* ends with a visual and aural insistence on poetic diction, transposing

a confrontation with death into a celebratory emphasis on the present with the shift of a single letter: long, song. From this perspective, *The Argonauts* overrides theory's knowingness in its final gesture, underscoring the sustenance to be found in the register of a de-universalized "we," one whose bonds lie in the intimate sphere where maternity, marriage, and kinship are revalued as queer.

This reading depends, of course, on how far we are willing to go in wedding the *Argo* to its Argonaut or, in a different idiom, in conferring agency for the constitution and effect of a text on the conscious intentions of its maker. Much of the critical archive that travels into the margins of *The Argonauts* stands against this rendition of authorship, though devotees of the staunchly poststructuralist writings of Judith Butler might wonder how *performativity* can be cited for its attention to the instability of norms without any mention of Butler's accompanying concern for the representational hallucinations of the self-authenticating "I" (Butler). Still, I'm willing to second the idea that what makes *The Argonauts* compelling to read is Nelson's authorial navigations – her ability, as several of my students put it, to focus on the ongoing negotiations (with others, the social world, one's self) that register how queer life emerges and endures. These navigations go a long way in consolidating the author as the voice of the text, its reliable, because autobiographical, "I." After all, there is nothing in the queer theoretical archive to suggest that queer world building happens by accident; to rephrase the title from an interview with Judith Butler, "There is [Always] a Person Here" (Breen 7). To see this in context, just consider how discussions of *The Argonauts*, including my own, give the author, Maggie Nelson, far more power than Barthes would allow in his mapping of the authorial function. "Linguistically," he writes in "The Death of the Author," "the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing other than the instance saying *I*: language knows a 'subject,' not a 'person'" (145).

This is not to say that Nelson, as author, intends the suture that the reader's desire for

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identification in the figure of the person most often performs. What the writer might want from her text, what the text *does*, and how it is read are elements that mean well beyond anyone's ability to grapple with the nuances and missteps of tracking intentions. If we add to this the fact – and I do take it as a fact – that the author and the "I" she unleashes under her name are never exactly the same, there is no safe cover when it comes to discerning which version of *The Argonauts* is to be heralded as the original resource for understanding autotheory's lessons. Everything that is the same is also different. The Kindle *Argonauts* is *The Argonauts* nonetheless.



disclosure statement

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