

Structured around the task of investigating and unpacking binary oppositions, Whitehead's essay uses Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* as an occasion for a larger reflection on the binary logic of patriarchy. The essay concludes with a call for inclusive listening. (Instructor: Bruce Bromley)

BOYS WHO CRY SAINT

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In his farewell speech to the White House, with tears glistening in his eyes, Richard Nixon canonized his mother: "I think of her, two boys dying of tuberculosis, nursing four others in order that she could take care of my older brother for three years in Arizona, and seeing each of them die. . . . Yes, she will have no books written about her. But she was a saint." It is clear that Nixon speaks out of veneration and affection. But the term "saint" is inextricable from the experience of suffering and, ultimately, death. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "saint" as "one of the blessed dead in Heaven," and even colloquially, "saint" is understood to mean "an extremely good or long-suffering person" ("saint, *adj.* and *n.*"). By aligning his mother with sainthood, Nixon praises her pain.

Female pain existed long before Nixon's speech in 1974. Despite the social and political movement toward the liberation of women, it has endured to the present day. Maggie Nelson addresses the question of female pain as it relates to identity in her memoir *The Argonauts*—how can we become ourselves in a culture that has a strained relationship with certain identities? What does it mean to be a mother when motherhood is both venerated and denigrated? What does it mean to be a woman when womanhood is treated in much the same way? What does it mean to be married? What does it mean to love?

Love is central to Nelson's questions. *The Argonauts* posits the idea of a love that is constantly recreated until it contains nothing of its original self, yet still goes by the same name (Nelson 5). Nelson represents this idea via Roland Barthes's metaphor of the mythological ship *Argo*: "Just as the *Argo's* parts may be replaced over time but

the boat is still called the *Argo*, whenever the lover utters the phrase 'I love you,' its meaning must be renewed by each use, as 'the very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new'" (5; qtd. in Nelson 5). This idea of an evolving love is the vessel that carries the experiences encompassed within *The Argonauts*. Nelson sets apart the experiences of womanhood, motherhood, and family-making from the norms of contemporary American culture. Her experiences of 'family,' for example, contain almost no conventional notions of the average family unit—Nelson's partner Harry is genderfluid, their first son comes from Harry's previous relationship, and their second son is conceived via a sperm donor.

Yet it can still be called 'family,' because it is a family. Many of Nelson's experiences coincide with queerness, yet she also grapples with the ways in which her experiences can be interpreted as 'hetero.' For instance, a friend refers to Nelson's family portrait emblazoned on a mug as "heteronormative" (Nelson 13). The family portrait depicts Nelson, pregnant, wearing a dress, and Harry and his son, both in suits—there is nothing in the image that explicitly expresses queerness. Yet queerness plays an essential role in their family unit. Through this tension, Nelson asks us to reconsider what the term 'queer' means to us—whether queerness must remain entirely separate from procreation and domesticity, or whether there is a place for family-making within it.

Within the tension that Nelson underlines between the terms 'queer' and 'straight' is the idea that 'straightness' is somehow undesirable for her; she feels uncomfortable being aligned with the term 'hetero.' Nelson's discomfort reveals to us that narratives of heterosexual marriage are, for her, almost inextricable from narratives of female pain. How did this happen? How did womanhood and motherhood become so closely aligned with suffering?

In a 2005 study, researchers Susan E. Stiritz and Britt-Marie Schiller observed:

[During the Victorian period,] images of saints helped articulate the new expectations for women. Newly resurrected images and stories about saints called on women to be the nurturing and

available objects men were able to demand, given the asymmetrical power arrangements that existed between the sexes. (Stiritz and Schiller, 1145-46)

Although women have since gained more political and social leverage in Western culture—as evidenced in the implementation of the 19th Amendment, *Roe v. Wade*, and Title IX—a 2016 study found that in terms of gender roles, people still perceive men and women as very different from one another. According to this study, “comparisons between [the 1980s and 2014] show stability of gender stereotypes across all components except female gender roles, which showed a significant increase in gender stereotyping” (Haines et al. 353). In other words, despite formal recognitions of women’s equality in American culture—the right to vote, to play sports, to claim bodily autonomy—ideas about gender roles may remain too similar to old, outdated ones.

In light of this information, we must confront the fact that there is still something very broken in the way straight men and straight women interact with one another. In fact, there are certain factions of feminists who believe that women today cannot be truly liberated unless they remove men from their personal lives. Regarding the early history of this movement, known as lesbian separatism, Robert Kulpa notes that:

[Lesbian separatist Charlotte Bunch] even insisted that heterosexual women could not fully understand and become feminists, because they remained within the male-oriented spectrum of heterosexual patriarchy. Only by . . . complete detachment from men could women fully develop their potential. (491)

Lesbian separatism can be considered a political stance, and a fringe one at that. However, the existence of such discourse among feminists leads us to the idea that by participating in ‘straightness,’ women are hurting themselves.

Many statistics support the idea that heterosexual marriage benefits men and harms women. *Harvard Men’s Health Watch* states that “a major survey of 127,545 American adults found that married men

are healthier than men who were never married or whose marriages ended in divorce or widowhood" ("Marriage and Men's Health"). The article goes on to note that there are not enough data on gay and lesbian marriages to draw the same conclusions as in the case of heterosexual marriages. Another study found gender differences in the association of mental disorders and substance abuse between men and women, and that "these differences may be related to gender differences in the experience of multiple role demands within marriage, especially those concerning parenting" (Scott et al.). At its core, the Western cultural norm of marriage between men and women is closely associated with female suffering, leading to the veneration of female sainthood. It is worth noting that in the Catholic tradition, the practice of canonizing saints stemmed from "[promotion of] the veneration of the martyrs" (Beccari). To be formally recognized as a saint by the Catholic Church, one must first die.

Despite the morbid associations of sainthood, the celebration of women as saints continues to saturate Western attitudes towards women. It is perhaps the result of centuries of political discourse on gender that I found myself in a situation where a man whom I was dating, in a casual conversation about spinach (of all things!), called me a bitch. When I responded with anger and hurt, he insisted that it was a joke, just a part of his vocabulary that had always been there and that slipped out sometimes. And, he insisted, it didn't really mean anything. I found it incredibly strange. As Nelson says, "*How can the words not be good enough?*" (7). It meant something to me. I asked him if he would ever call his mother a bitch. He responded with indignation—"My mother was a saint," he told me.

Here, we find ourselves in a binary; if you are not a bitch, you must be a saint, and vice versa. Part of this binary manifests in Sigmund Freud's 'Madonna-whore complex.' Like much of Freudian psychology, this term has made its way into conventional Western ideas about female sexuality. But what this term originally referred to is a sexual disorder in which one experiences "an inability to maintain arousal within an intimate and committed relationship" (Kaplan 4). Freud attributed this to "a splitting of the tender and the sensual dimension of sexuality" (Hartmann). In other words, Freud found that his patients were experiencing dysfunction as they were not able

to view committed partners with both respect and desire, because of Victorian ideals of sexuality that aligned respectability with sainthood, purity, and suffering. To them, a woman could not possibly be both respected and desired.

Where does that leave us with this strange nexus of political, social, and sexual realities—a series of binaries inside which no person, regardless of gender, could be expected to fit seamlessly? How, as Nelson rightly asks, are we supposed to navigate this great journey of life in a culture where the very existence of womanhood is under attack? Can love between men and women occur peacefully in a world where men glorify the suffering of women instead of respecting them?

The answer can be found within the pages of *The Argonauts*. Nelson's work demonstrates that we can write about our suffering; we can write about love; we can write about the process of making a family; we can write and write and write. We can write our realities as they exist for us, despite a culture that will deny us those realities. Storytelling is radical because it denies those in power the ability to claim that our realities do not exist.

The Argonauts functions primarily through storytelling. Though it is, at heart, Nelson's memoir, it also exists, beautifully, in the liminal space between memoir and criticism. Nelson's writing is not strictly personal, or strictly political; instead, for her, the personal is political. This integration begins in the formatting of *The Argonauts*. Nelson does not demarcate chapters, sections, or subsections. Instead, there is merely plain text, a format that is more familiar in, for example, an epic poem. No single idea that Nelson posits can truly be categorized. Instead, her words simply exist adjacent to one another—not in a binary, but perhaps on the collective plane of Nelson's experience.

Nelson also weaves many voices into her story by citing the authors of italicized quotes in the margin. Often, marginal citation is the only citation offered; in the body of the text, Nelson's thoughts flow seamlessly with those of other writers. This is first seen when she quotes Ludwig Wittgenstein: “[she] stopped smugly repeating ‘Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly’ and wondered anew, can everything be thought” (4). Here, Nelson brings to light the first of many binaries that she will interrogate: the question of what is thinkable and unthinkable, what is nameable and

“unnameable,” “things whose essence is flicker, flow” (4). The essence of *The Argonauts* itself seems almost to be that of “flicker” and “flow.” Nelson’s writing incorporates many different perspectives and ranges across many different topics, but it all seems to return to one word: *Argo*. *Argo* is love, family, experience; it is the fragile thing that she is building with her partner and her sons and her mother and her partner’s mother and the very project of existence itself. The title of her book, *The Argonauts*, implies seamanship—that is, she and her family, her Argonauts, are embarking upon a journey with love as their vessel.

Throughout that journey, myriad complications arise, many of them centered around the binary of “queer” and “straight.” In the instance of marriage that Nelson discusses in *The Argonauts*, there is a certain type of cognitive dissonance that she experiences—the friction in our minds that occurs when our idea of love is met with strangers, “with YES ON PROP 8 signs hammered into their lawns, stick figures indefatigably rejoicing” (Nelson 23). But Nelson’s experience of marriage holds nothing of the conventional straight experience of marriage. Rather than casting herself, her partner, and her children on one side of a binary—either as straight or queer, sinner or saint—Nelson allows us to see that it is possible to embody both sides of the binary. As a result, we see that the binary has multiple dimensions; it is not just one or the other, but an entire spectrum of places in which one can exist as oneself.

Nelson recognizes that there is more care taken in this, in understanding that each person exists on their own terms, than in anything else. She comes to this understanding through her evolving relationship with Harry. Harry’s position within certain binaries is already complicated by the culture that he lives in: he is a genderfluid person who identifies as male and uses masculine pronouns. Nelson describes a trip to a pumpkin patch where Harry pays for the pumpkins with his card, which has the name ‘Harriet’ on it, and the cashier assumes the card belonged to Nelson: “We just froze in the way we freeze, until Harry said, ‘It’s my card.’ Long pause, sidelong stare. A shadow of violence usually drifts over the scene. ‘It’s complicated,’ Harry finally said” (89). These moments are complicated and unsettling for Nelson and her partner; there is a sinister presence in them, what Nelson calls

the “shadow of violence.” This particular form of suffering that manifests in Harry and Nelson’s relationship with the world is not the same one that we see echoed in straight marriages. Straight marriages’ relationship to suffering is tied to harmful gender roles for both men and women. But the suffering that Nelson and Harry experience is specifically tied to their place within the spectrum of things a marriage could be: not just between a straight man and a straight woman, but between “two human animals, one of whom is blessedly neither male nor female, the other of whom is female (more or less)” (142). Their suffering rejects the binaries of straight or queer, good or bad; it merely is. In *The Argonauts*, Nelson describes moments where she did not yet understand the way that Harry merely is. She finds tension in the ways in which Harry’s values, his very being, rub up against hers. She asserts that “words are good enough,” but “before long [she learns] that [Harry] had spent a lifetime equally devoted to the conviction that words are not good enough” (3-4). Nelson seems to conclude that perhaps the answer lies on that boundary; neither of them is right, but each of them is not wrong to believe in being right, because each reality is true. They exist, and their beliefs exist, on their own terms.

Through this tension, Nelson explains that no one binary is as simple as we often make it out to be. Nelson’s thoughts on abortion, for example, are at once startlingly complex and simple: she imagines a bumper sticker that reads “IT’S A CHOICE AND A CHILD” (94). On the American political spectrum, Democrats typically believe in the choice, and Republicans typically believe in the child, but neither of those beliefs encompass the truth, which is that this dichotomy is a false one. In contrast, Nelson’s take on this issue is extraordinarily feminist and full of care.

No human being, complex and simple animals that we are, can truly be encompassed by any binary. This is why marriage has become so treacherous for straight women, because Western culture too often places the intrinsic value of women within a binary. You can be Nixon’s mother, the saint, tending to little boys dying of tuberculosis, or you can be the sinner—or the bitch, or the whore, or whatever name is chosen for you. Each label has an ascribed value: the saintly mother is venerated, but the woman called ‘bitch’ or ‘whore’ is denigrated. The common thread between these two labels is the over-

whelming silence that surrounds them, evidenced by the absence of books in their honor. Or perhaps absence is not the right word, because we have before us *The Argonauts*, a work full of honor and care. Perhaps what we are facing is an absence of honor for the books themselves. Although *The Argonauts* has received glowing reviews from many accredited publications and was a *New York Times* best-seller, some remain unconvinced as to its value. In a book review for *The Ark Review*, Giovanna Barbara Alesandro writes that “[she] want[s] to shake the book for the opinions to rearrange themselves and for something that is just a tiny bit braver and a little less self-congratulatory than what it is now: A Carrie-Bradshaw-gone-queer-memoir in the style of something straight out of a women’s magazine.” Alesandro’s main criticism here is that *The Argonauts* is somehow less valuable for containing Nelson’s thoughts about herself, her family, and her experiences. In other words, *The Argonauts* does not fit into Alesandro’s definition of what ‘good’ books by women should look like, or what books about pregnancy should look like, or any number of impossible binaries into which we attempt to cast one another. Instead, Alesandro rejects Nelson’s work, along with other media considered pointless because its target audience is women. But by denying Nelson the intrinsic value of her narrative, Alesandro is denying Nelson her reality.

More than anything else, Nelson is asking us to stop and *listen* for a while. The proliferation of theory that is so tightly woven into the text of *The Argonauts* reveals that this is not just a project in ego. It is the result of many voices coming together to speak important truths; it is about centuries and centuries of discourse on the binaries of gender, sexuality, and love that have led us to where we are now—the very same discussions that led Nelson to her marriage and her sons. It is about how we can continue to go forward from here. The end that Nelson eventually arrives at is not so grand; she wonders, “is there really such a thing as nothing, as nothingness? I don’t know. I know we’re still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our care, its ongoing song” (143). But this ending does not need to be grand; it only needs to be a point where we are left, a point from which we can leave one story and begin the next.

Where does the next story begin? In the name of ongoing love, I believe that the troubling gender politics found in straight marriage can be combated with something of the energy that runs throughout *The Argonauts*—love, perhaps, but also something more concrete than that: a refusal to place any one human being in a binary where they do not belong. No more women who are saints, no more women who are bitches, no more women who suffer silently in the roles given to them, only women who are. Women who exist, somewhere, on their own terms.

However, the world is large and unforgiving. To simply erase thousands of years of tradition and stereotypes would be an impossible task. But I offer one endeavor, a journey one can take: listen. To Nelson, and to the voices she has curated inside *The Argonauts*. To voices both supporting and opposing. To the world, as it buzzes around you. To human beings existing on their own terms. Then think about Nixon, that perpetrator of binaries, who called his mother a saint and then lamented all the books that would never be written about her. You, too, reader, listener, can write. You, too, can be an Argonaut. And the ship you make may just carry you, along with others.

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