


The Argonauts

by: Maggie Nelson

pgs. 52-55



How to explain—"trans" may work well enough as shorthand, but the quickly developing mainstream narrative it evokes ("born in the wrong body," necessitating an orthopedic pilgrimage between two fixed destinations) is useless for some—but partially,

or even profoundly, useful for others? That for some, "transitioning" may mean leaving one gender entirely behind, while for others—like Harry, who is happy to identify as a butch on T—it doesn't? *I'm not on my way anywhere*, Harry sometimes tells inquirers. How to explain, in a culture frantic for resolution, that sometimes the shit stays messy? *I do not want the female gender that has been assigned to me at birth. Neither do I want the male gender that transsexual medicine can furnish and that the state will award me if I behave in the right way. I don't want any of it.* How to explain that for some, or for some at some times, this irresolution is OK—desirable, even (e.g., "gender hackers")—whereas for others, or for others at some times, it stays a source of conflict or grief? How does one get across the fact that the best way to find out how people feel about their gender or their sexuality—or anything else, really—is to listen to what they tell you, and to try to treat them accordingly, without shellacking over their version of reality with yours?

The *presumptuousness* of it all. On the one hand, the Aristotelian, perhaps evolutionary need to put everything into categories—*predator, twilight, edible*—on the other, the need to pay homage to the transitive, the flight, the great soup of being in which we actually live. *Becoming*. Deleuze and Guattari called this flight: becoming-animal, becoming-woman, becoming-molecular. A becoming in which one never becomes, a becoming whose rule is neither evolution nor asymptote but a certain turning, a certain turning inward, *turning into my own / turning on in / to my own self / at last / turning out of the / white cage, turning out of the / lady cage / turning at last.*


It's painful for me that I wrote a whole book calling into question identity politics, only then to be constituted as a token of lesbian identity. Either people didn't really read the book, or the commodification

Beatriz Preciado

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Butler

of identity politics is so strong that whatever you write, even when it's explicitly opposed to that politics, gets taken up by that machinery.



I think Butler is generous to name the diffuse “commodification of identity” as the problem. Less generously, I’d say that the simple fact that she’s a lesbian is so blinding for some, that whatever words come out of her mouth—whatever words come out of *the lesbian’s* mouth, whatever ideas spout from her head—certain listeners hear only one thing: *lesbian, lesbian, lesbian*. It’s a quick step from there to discounting the lesbian—or, for that matter, anyone who refuses to slip quietly into a “postracial” future that resembles all too closely the racist past and present—as *identitarian*, when it’s actually the listener who cannot get beyond the identity that he has imputed to the speaker. Calling the speaker *identitarian* then serves as an efficient excuse not to listen to her, in which case the listener can resume his role as speaker. And then we can scamper off to yet another conference with a keynote by Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, at which we can meditate on Self and Other, grapple with radical difference, exalt the decisiveness of the Two, and shame the unsophisticated identitarians, all at the feet of yet another great white man pontificating from the podium, just as we’ve done for centuries.

In response to a journalist who asked him to “summarize himself in a nutshell,” John Cage once said, “Get yourself out of whatever cage you find yourself in.” He knew his name was stuck to him, or he was stuck to it. Still, he urges out of it. The *Argo’s* parts may get replaced, but it’s still called the *Argo*. We may become more used to jumping into flight, but that doesn’t mean we have done with all perches. *We ought to say a feeling of and, a feeling of if, a feeling of but, and a feeling of by, quite as readily as we say a feeling of blue or a feeling of cold.* We ought

William James

to, but we don’t—or at least, we don’t quite as readily. But the more you do, the more quickly you can recognize the feeling when it comes around again, and hopefully you won’t need to stare as long.