

Other Voices Esma Moukhtar

IDENTITY (AGAIN)

The title above reads 'Other Voices' but it might as well be 'The Identity Issue' or 'Troubles in paradise'.

When you feel free, and included where you want to be, you can say: "Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same" like Foucault did in his introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), or: "I have to change to stay the same" as Willem de Kooning put it and repeats it every day when one enters the academy at Blaak, where his words hang on the facade.

But, in order to change, you must have had, somehow, the opportunity to have a sense of 'self' or a hint of identity that is not ignored or problematized by others. It seems, in other words a luxury to change and not wanting to answer the question 'who are you?'

When you are not (feeling) free or liberated yet, you might say:

'Ask me who I am and let me be that way. I don't need to change to become who I am.'

Some might think we live in a paradise where we can choose who we are and can be what we want and that identity is no longer an issue. Still, straight white male normativity dominates this paradise and seldom we realize what the privileges are of those who fit in the prefabricated structures of our (western) society.

Is being a woman, or gay, or a person of color, or a person in-between sexes, religions, or a combination of these and other variations that are walking around or sit in our classrooms *really* unproblematic for everyone? Are we, after about three feminist waves, a few so-called postcolonial decades and their identity politics, the many colored movements, gay prides and gender-fuck parties, not done with all that? Can't we speak now of a post-identity era, in which we have to move onwards, focus on common crises, projects and goals and forget about our personal identities? Or are we *not* done yet, because not everyone is really 'included', *still*?

Maybe we should add an extra 'post' behind 'post identity', like we added another post to 'post modernism', 'postcolonial', 'post feminism', 'post blackness', 'post gender' and 'post critical'. Maybe we are 'post free' and back to these issues in a new way/wave, in order to make everyone at least *really* feel included so that we can finally move forward, together? To be able to continue or to retake the discussion we need to look back first and discuss various questions and ideas around certain concepts and troubles of identity.

The idea for this series arose while reading two books during one month, this year. One was an essay-novel about love, relations and ideas on identity in general and gender related issues and queerness in particular. In Maggie Nelson's book *The Argonauts* of 2015 (Dutch translation coming out in September/October this year) a young female author (Maggie Nelson) describes in loose but smartly related fragments her life as a lover, writer, former student, teacher, woman, poet, feminist, queer... becoming a mother too and the transformations of her body. According to her experiences the queer scene where she and her lover – the artist Harry Dodge, formerly Harriet and now a transgender, 'butch on T.' (testosterone) – are part of,

seems to prescribe what is queer and what is too straight for ‘the scene’.

WHAT TROUBLES

Subversive (sub)cultures can sometimes be quite exclusive. As if other people are entitled to question your queerness once you decide to marry or want to become a mother or father. Since when does ‘queer’ mean that you have to skip every ‘tradition’, isn’t anyone in a way, a deviation of normativity, doing a variation on traditions and rules, even the so-called straight people, having their own fetishes, porn and games? The difference between queer and hetero normativity isn’t all that clear or simple; isn’t everyone different, despite gender, love and color? In that sense a fixed identity seems a trap.

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?¹

Nelson is writing about the different transformations they are going through, in both a personal and an intellectual manner, critical and literary, feminist and funny, straight from the heart and queer to the bottom in her own way. Her private life made public is politically ‘relevant’ since it speaks about issues of identity in a way we thought we needn’t but still... and about how it is related to language, performance, theory and everyday practice, and to thought *and* feeling.

She questions the meaning of terms such as ‘difference’ and ‘queer’ as opposed to ‘the norm’. Can a certain idea about queerness become too narrow, like any other norm it wants to subvert from?

Nelson often refers to writers or artists who inspired her. Judith Butler, for instance, a key figure in the philosophy of gender and sexuality, writes about the construction of identity and the performativity of language in her seminal book *Gender Trouble*. Or Sarah Ahmed, who speaks of ‘embodied others’ and ‘affects’, the role of emotions in our interactions. Nelson applies the various things she has read in her own story and passes it on to us.

About half way reading *The Argonauts*, Flora who was cat sitting in my apartment, picked it up and took it with her and wrote me later on to tell you this:

In the two weeks of reading, or perhaps more accurately; surrendering to Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, I felt like experiencing a form of education unlike any other provoked by a book. In writing on gender-fluidity, queer family building, the vulnerability of transformation, and eventually more than anything on love, Nelson herself seems to practice what she writes and thinks

¹ Nelson, Maggie, *The Argonauts*. London: Melvillehouse UK, 2016 (First published in 2015 in the United States by Greywolf Press.)

about, and with impeccable fluidity. She bends from thought-conversations with a wide variety of great thinkers to personal memories and anecdotes using great flexibility, as well as lightness and humble searching. In thinking along with her words I felt questioned, moved, changed, uncomfortable, vulnerable and like I'd met a dear friend. And maybe most of all: I felt like daring to hope for a world with more queerness - in a time where this is one of the most accurate, yet difficult to attain states, or spaces of experiencing & thinking.

In the years during art school of trying, of finding a way, voice and medium to transmit one's ideas into works of art, this book can tell you something about that transmission. It introduces in an unpretentious manner philosophers, thinkers and artists as people to enter into dialogue with, who walked similar pathways as the one you are on right now. It too gives you glimpses of the visual power of words and language as any other art material; sometimes precise and sometimes lacking exactly that precision. If I were to recommend any book to any art student working in this era, it's this one.²

As said, there was another important book that led to the current reading list. *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine, a poetic series of brief stories, 'reports' and thoughts on everyday, 'casual' racism, is written from the perspective of a black American woman telling us things that we think we know but don't, or things we don't want to know but should. Also in this book, the relation to identity is troubled: on the one hand it seems a burden, on the other it needs to be acknowledged before you can do without or be fluid about it. Rankine too, like Nelson, refers to Judith Butler, who not only talks about gender trouble but of all the things coming from not knowing how language is constituting what we think, what we (think we) are, what we feel and perform and do to ourselves and each other.

Not long ago you are in a room where someone asks the philosopher Judith Butler what makes language hurtful. You can feel everyone lean in. Our very being exposes us to the address of another, she answers. We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness, she adds, is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this.

For so long you thought the ambition of racist language was to denigrate and erase you as a person. After considering Butler's remarks, you begin to understand yourself as rendered hypervisible in the face of such language acts. Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present. Your alertness, your openness, and your desire to engage actually demand your presence, your looking up, your talking back, and, as insane as it is, saying please.³

² Woudstra, Flora (artist, alumnus of WdKA Rotterdam and MA student at Dutch Art Institute Arnhem).

³ Rankine, Claudia, *Citizen*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Greywolf Press, 2014.