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Non-Binary Fashion Tips for Professionals



Andy I.

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At the opening of my New York Times interview, I told the writer, “I’m fully prepared to think of this as a pleasant chat that you and I are going to have, none of which is going to get printed,” and I was pretty close to right. I’m neither surprised nor mad that the rabble-rousing parts of the interview didn’t make it to print, even if I’d had a sliver of hope that I was going to be able to pair a cute outfit with some anarchist propaganda on a larger-than-usual platform.

But hey, it’s the Times, not De Arbeter Fraynd, we manage our expectations going in, and nobody can stop me from talking all I want on my own time about the inextricable entanglement of aesthetic and revolution.

Plenty of ink has been spilled about how the law is inherently deradicalizing as a strategy and as a profession. It’s hard to spend all day contorting into the logical and ethical backbends that are necessary for what we do without sustaining some injury. It’s made harder by existing within a legal services and advocacy arm of the non-profit industrial complex that treats radical idealism as a resource to be extracted.

Young attorneys tumble out of law school into a scene that bounces them from project to crushingly exploitative project, racking up first- and second-hand trauma with no support until they inevitably burn out and end up out of the field or in the hospital. In



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only our clients, but also us, while instructing us that if we just did a little bit better, we could “save” them from its violence — a radical politic staggers.

And it’s tempting to think that if we can make a legal profession that has room for us, us with our queerness, us in all our non-binary glory, us in our refusal to be sanitized and contained in the boundaries of a professionalism that was always a proxy for white supremacy anyway, that maybe that by itself would change something substantive too. I also desperately want my commitment to banging my head against the strictures of the profession to mean something — if not for myself, then for the next generation of people like me. It’s the same urge, I think, as the desire to get that “X” gender marker, to insist that a bailiff not misgender us, to plant a flag firmly in the realm of demanding recognition from the institution and simply keep demanding it until either it comes or we break.

As someone who is watching my colleagues and friends break around me, I want to question the assumptions that strategy rests on: specifically, the assumption that the institutions that govern us *can* and *should* recognize us, that their recognition of us is something to be desired and fought for for its own sake, and that the best possible outcome is a fully inclusive state, a prison system with men’s, women’s, and non-binary people’s institutions, and gender-neutral bathrooms in the corporate counsel offices of Shell and Amazon. If we imagine that we can ride our own identities to an inclusive profession, and that an inclusive profession is an end in and of itself, there’s no reason not to throw ourselves into this role.

This is the line of thinking that led me to say to a very sweet New York Times journalist, “I know this will never be printed, but I fully believe that a non-binary aesthetic must be backed up by an anarchist politic or it’s nothing but a lewk.”



Top, the therapist El Layla Johnson said it sometimes felt as if their manual for dressing as a nonbinary person "got lost in the mail." Andy Izenson, above, a lawyer with the Chosen Family Law Center, said that their strategy in court "is to be as invisible as possible." Photographs by Clement Pascal for The New York Times

Now on one level, this is a basic critique of identity politics. We can't assume that doing the profession of law non-binarily is necessarily doing it in a radically transformative way, any more than doing anything while holding a marginalized identity is necessarily radically transformative. Non-binary people are as capable of holding regressive values, of universalizing our own experiences, of prioritizing our comfort over solidarity, as anyone else.

But I think non-binary identity gives us a precious opportunity in the way that it forces us just a little ways outside the institutions and systems that govern us. For a lot of non-binary people — especially white non-binary people — that exclusion is something new, and newly painful.

And it's cold out here! Of course we want to go back inside. Of course we want to hammer at the door and yell to be let back in, to have space made for us, to be welcomed into those institutions and systems despite our identities. But maybe it's possible to tolerate the discomfort for long enough to really look at what we're being

excluded from, and what our exclusion means about the thing we're being excluded from, and who else is out here with us, and what we might be able to do together.

Anything that creates experiences of marginalization in an individual's day-to-day life is an entry point for solidarity. Without much hope that it would work, I asked the Times writer to let my interview be an invitation into that beautiful and necessary space, into the complexity and expansiveness that opens up before us when we turn our backs on the state and turn instead to each other.

So where does that leave us and our day jobs and our loans? There's no single right answer, but for me, I'm prioritizing being strategic.

When I'm at work, my focus is on my clients in the practical realities of their lives. If I correct a judge who calls me "Mr." or "Ms.," how will it affect the judge's perception of my client and their case? If my presence, my appearance, my body, makes an Attorney for the Child uncomfortable, what impact will that have on my client's ability to stay in connection with their child? If a prosecutor refuses to take our conversation seriously because of what I look like, will that change the outcome of an arraignment? If I'm late to a hearing because I got pulled out of the courthouse security line because of mismatched gender markers on my IDs, how does that impact my client's life? And how can I ethically rank the importance of my own feelings of comfort or affirmation against these things?

And I always talk this strategy through with my clients, because supporting their autonomy in the context of a state that seeks to crush it is the bottom line of how I think about my job. I just transferred a client in a rural jurisdiction to a cisgender colleague after we decided together that the risk of a judge being prejudiced by my presence was a risk neither of us wanted them to take. Whether the obstacles they identify to their autonomy are the name or gender marker on their IDs, the strictures of civil, criminal, or immigration law, or the entanglement of the state with things like healthcare or family building, my priority in supporting them is their autonomy, not recognition. Keeping that focus helps me advise them and prioritize within my own work.

The only line from my interview that actually ended up in the article was "I try to be as invisible as possible...I overshoot masculine because I can't predict, when someone

looks at me, what they're going to see. If they think that I'm a woman in a suit, that's fine, right? That's not weird. That doesn't make anyone want to punch you."

I remember saying to the interviewer, "If you can keep them from cutting one line, don't let them cut that professionalism is always a proxy for white supremacy," but this is not my first rodeo. I know that even when a journalist is a comrade (they were!) and doing their best (they were!) they don't make the final decisions on a lot of parts of how an article comes out. I know that the process by which an interview becomes a live article is a meat grinder into which you can pour your most nuanced and deeply considered opinions, and if you're lucky, what comes out the other end is a comprehensible sentence. So I'm saying it here: what non-binary people wear in the workplace is a conversation worth having only when it implicates a critical eye to what professionalism is and where it comes from. Non-binary identity is beautiful and amazing and, at its best, is an opportunity to divest your self-understanding from the state and throw your heart into community. We cannot make a state that recognizes us or cares for us in a way that matters, because that is not what states are for; the bad news about this is that the state is just the consolidation of legitimized violence and that's a bummer, but the good news about this is that we recognize each other, and we care for each other, and that's the whole point of why we're here.

Or maybe you're actually just here for the non-binary fashion tips, so here are a few of those:

- Get your suits at thrift stores and then get them tailored. You should get them tailored anyway, and you might as well pay \$80 to tailor a \$10 suit as a \$110 one.
- Beauty Bakerie makes great quality, high pigment lip colors that will hold up to a KN-95.
- If you want to wear heels and most "women's" shoe brands don't make your size, try Pleaser. They're best known as a stage brand, but they do actually make cute regular pumps and ballet flats, and they go up to size 16.
- Clothes rules are made-up in the same way that money rules are made-up — they're not "real" in some universal sense, but they still affect your life materially. Choose to conform or deviate strategically and with a solid grounding in your values.

- If you're engaging in less socially sanctioned strategies, leave the flashy outfit at home and don't forget to cover all visible tattoos.
- Always practical solidarity; never practical shoes.

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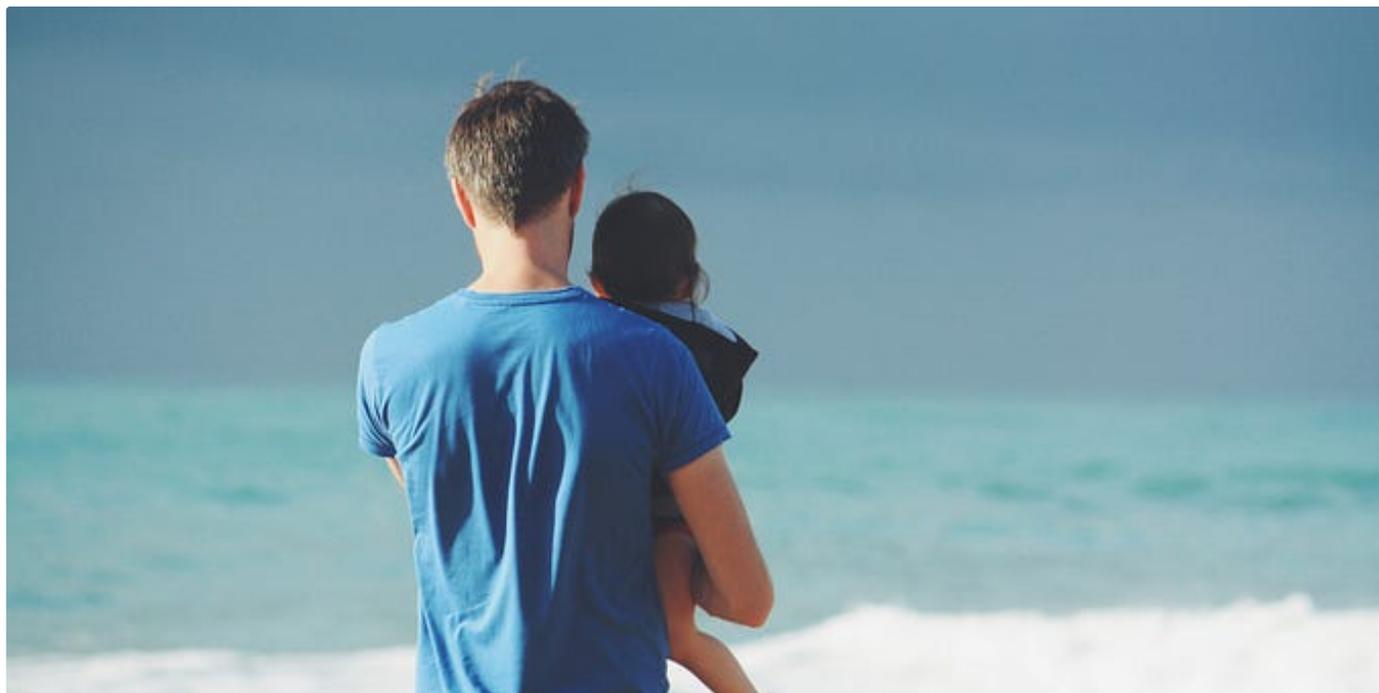
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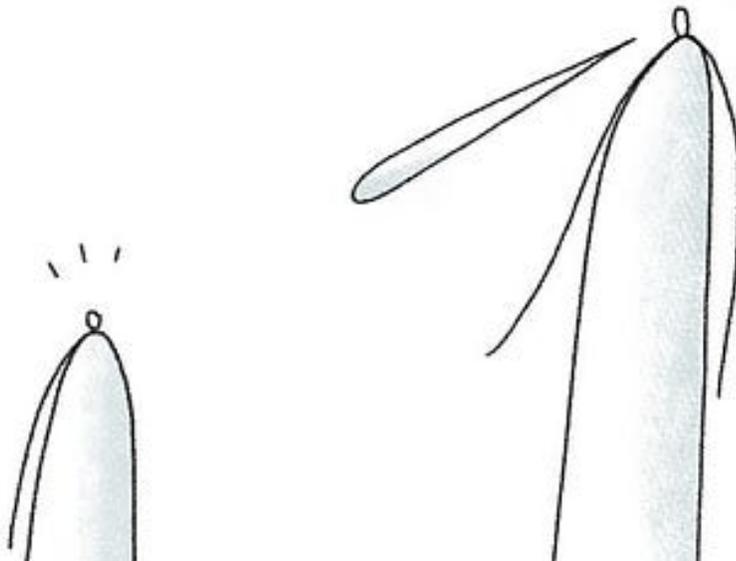
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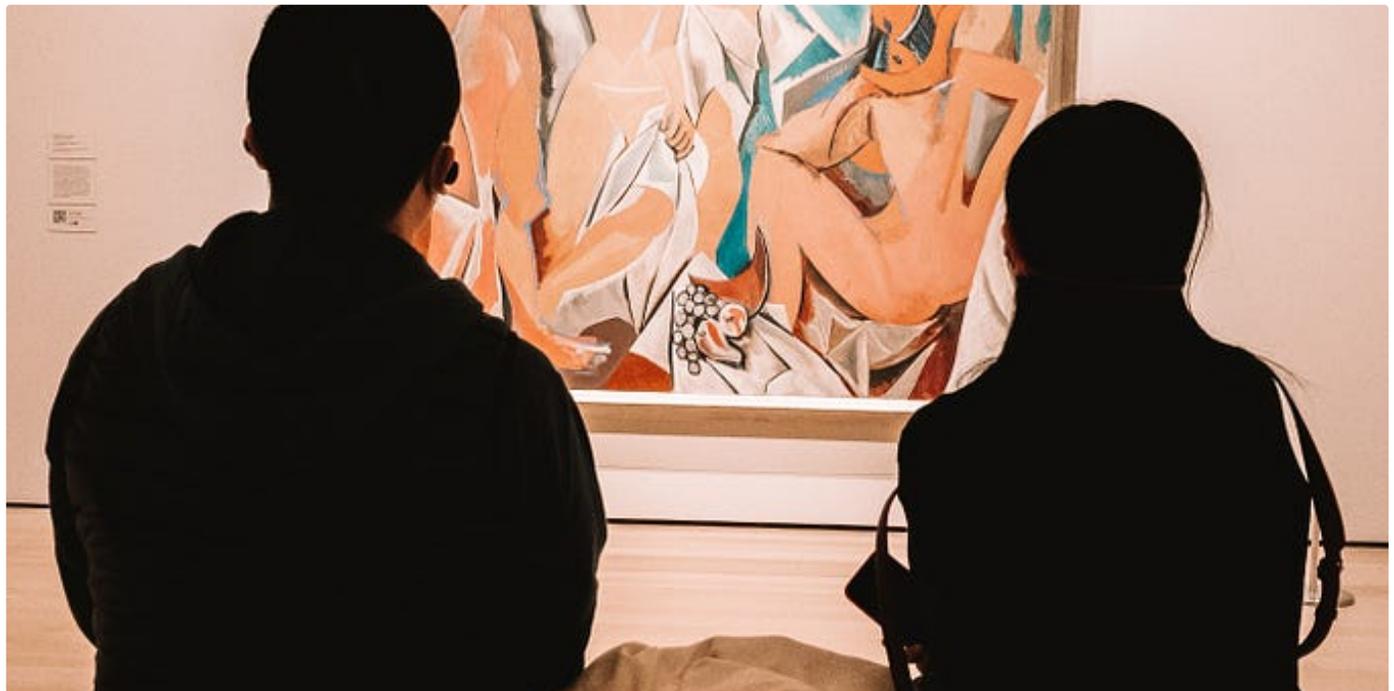
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