

Jack Halberstam

Trans : A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*

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Reviewed by Perry Zurn, 2018

Perry Zurn is an assistant professor of philosophy at American University. He researches broadly in the fields of political philosophy, gender theory, and applied ethics, and his work specifically contributes to curiosity studies and critical prison studies. He is the co-editor of *Active Intolerance: Michel Foucault, the Prisons Information Group, and the Future of Abolition and Carceral Notebooks 12*. He is currently writing a monograph entitled *The Politics of Curiosity* (University of Minnesota Press, under contract). Committed to diversity work, Zurn currently serves as chair of the APA Committee on LGBT People in the Profession (2017-2021).

I want to begin with a recognition of what Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* did for a generation of trans masculine people. I think of how many copies carry underlining on every page. How many water-stained title pages are scrawled with now old, retired, or dead names. How many margins are peppered with exclamation marks, question marks, checks, and stars, a few "huh's" and "me's." I think of all those folks who happened upon Halberstam's claim that, for Cleo in the film *Set It Off*, masculinity is "a survival skill as well as a liability, pleasure as well as danger," something one "lives and dies by" (Halberstam 1998, 230) and thought "won't we all." I begin, then, with a kind of gratefulness for the visibility and the language Halberstam has brought to trans--especially trans masculine--experience over the years.

In his¹ newest book, *Trans**, Halberstam sets out to do it again. Wide-ranging in its explorations, this slim volume aims to provide some wisdom at a pivotal moment in trans history. It is a moment in which trans people are, perhaps paradoxically, increasingly recognized--the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, just adopted the term "trans*"--and increasingly targeted by anti-trans legislation and other forms of violence. Yet *Trans* : A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* is, at first glance, an odd title for this text. Little is offered by way of an account (or accounting) of trans experience, let alone of gender variability broadly construed. What is offered is a sustained insistence that trans communities ought to be more accountable to gender variability itself. Indeed, if *Trans** has a message, it is that trans* is bigger than people think and as such should not be policed, especially by trans people themselves. For Halberstam, what "gets lost in the rush to recognize, definitively classify, and thus solidify the shifting ground of trans* identifications" (73) is the fundamental truth that "the trans* body . . . does not seek to be seen and known but rather wishes to throw the organization of all bodies into doubt" (90). *Trans** calls the trans community and its allies to account for forgetting its deconstructive history and power in a neoliberal age.

*Trans** is, in fact, a quick and quirky read. Bearing a number of Montaigne-like qualities, the book is an essay in the truest sense. *Trans** is broken up into six chapters, but not discrete topics. The chapters bleed into one another, such that chapter 1's considerations of trans terminology reappear in chapter 6's discussion of trans feminisms; chapter 4's exploration of trans

intergenerational tensions reprises chapter 3's concerns with the shifting contours of trans childhood; and the trans bodies centered in chapter 2 "stall [the] systems of significance" and representation analyzed in chapter 5 (94). Throughout the book, Halberstam roots his musings in personal experience--whether of his body, his childhood, his writings, or his career. Opening *Trans** with her affection for David Bowie (xi), Halberstam moves through memories of her own genderqueer childhood (45), her gender-ambiguous gym teacher (63), her coming out (107), and her top surgery (22). He takes time to recontextualize his earlier work on bathrooms, Brandon Teena, and queer temporality in *Female Masculinity* and *In a Queer Time and Place* (133, 87, 94). And she wryly recalls being dismissed, at a conference, as the "sports dad of queer theory" for her grumpiness about "kids these days" (85).

There is much to recommend this text, including its introductory review of some recent trans scholarship and its gloss of contemporary challenges facing the trans community. In particular, I find Halberstam's warnings about the complexity of gaining visibility and recognition spot on (cf. Gossett, Stanley, and Burton 2017). As his analysis unfurls, chapter by chapter, he argues that trans politics simply cannot rest on the demand for "accurate" language, appeals to "realness," media representation, legal recognition and protection, access to public accommodations, medical codification, and trans child-rearing protocols. The systems we inhabit will always be insufficient, anachronistic, and duplicitous, insofar as they usher in "new regulatory regimes" (18, 49) that "both fix us and allow us to imagine ourselves as free" (14). Again, I am sympathetic to this claim. And yet I would temper Halberstam's call to instead privilege the "quirk[iness]" (110) of trans experience with my own insistence on the necessity of material and theoretical struggle, by which real people, in all their complexity, shoulder the (im)possible task of terminological precision and practical reprieves.

I also find Halberstam's attention to intergenerational tensions in the trans community to be of critical importance. Her call to honor the wisdom of our trans elders is especially meaningful in an era of keen generational alienation, but also in a community that suffers from the fragmentation and isolation generated by systemic oppression. He writes:

Using the concept of impossibility and even trans* "unrealities" . . . we might turn away from the pragmatics of recognition and identification and look instead to the way older generations of trans* people lived and survived in the realms of the inauthentic, the unfaithful, and the unverifiable. They did so not in the hope of one day being recognized as real but because the violence of the real was not worth the price of admission. (83)

Here, Halberstam explicitly aligns her brief for a quixotic conception of trans*--as disinvested in as it is ill-suited for mainstream recognition--with an older form of trans life. To my mind, however, these and other historically significant trans survival strategies need not replace but can complement the tactics that younger trans folks deploy, as they cultivate terminological sensitivity and fight for legal rights.

Although I appreciate the breezy, approachable style that marks *Trans**, I find some of its concomitant imprecision to be quite troubling. For example, Halberstam defines "cis-gender" as describing "people who have genders compatible with their genital forms" (1). Besides the nebulous terms "compatible" and "genital forms," this definition unnecessarily centers genitalia

in the cis/trans distinction and excludes the possibility both that trans people may experience compatibility with their genitalia *and* that cis people may experience incompatibility with their genitalia.² Halberstam also defines "agender" as being "androgynous, gender fluid, [or] gender neutral," insisting, though, that "the concept of being without a gender is whimsical at best" (9). Many agender people, however, report not having a gender.³ Halberstam's suggestion that such testimonials reflect "whimsical" thinking unfortunately reprises the trope that trans people simply live in a world of make believe.⁴ Surely precision in defining the term *cisgender* and respect for the phenomenon of agender experience is necessary for any account of trans* gender variability.

Furthermore, I agree with Halberstam that debates over trans terminology ought to be guided by generosity, but I caution that such generosity must also fuel a vibrant attention to how trans people describe themselves. In the context of tracing historical representations of trans characters in film, Halberstam discusses a moment of disrobement in *The Crying Game*, when Fergus, an IRA member, realizes his love interest, Dil, is a transwoman. Halberstam states that Fergus "confronts Dil's 'incomplete' transition--namely, her penis" (93). Not once in the film, however, does Dil--or Fergus for that matter--apply this male anatomical term to her body. Given trans people's beautiful power to rename and resignify their bodies and experience, it is important not to foist terminology on them from the outside, especially when that terminology retethers them to cisnormative frameworks. Similarly, in his gloss of *Ma Vie en Rose*, Halberstam describes the protagonist Ludo as "a femme boy," who "never calls himself a trans-gender child," but "simply occupies a space of experimentation" (56). In the film, however, Ludo clearly identifies with girls, asserts they are in their body by "mistake," only later admits "I'm a boy-girl," but still vehemently denies their sister's assertion, "You're not a girl." It is Ludo's mother who dismisses their gender as mere "experimenting [*cherche*]." Again, it is an act of trans solidarity to refuse to anchor Ludo as "boy" and "he," instead honoring the terms they do and do not use.

Finally, by her own admission, Halberstam privileges US trans experience generally, and trans masculine experience more specifically. He grants that the book's US focus contributes to the "hegemonic depiction of transgenderism as a Euro-American phenomenon" (38). She also grants that the book is "lop-sided," "skew[ed]," and "imbalance[d]" (137) in favor of trans masculine experience. As he explains, "While I would like to keep the focus equally on transgender women and men, my particular biography and my academic background tend to draw me to the trans* masculine material" (27). In so framing the dilemma, Halberstam implicitly, if inadvertently, states that trans nonbinary experience is not his concern and need not be his concern.⁵ Of course, as continued efforts to decolonize trans studies have demonstrated, these commitments to US, masculine, and binary gender experience are not unrelated (Aizura et al., 2014). Although Halberstam admits to diversifying her repertoire in response to reviewers, in still acquiescing to her personal tendencies, she risks misdescribing the scope of the *Trans** and trans* project. Again, surely any viable account of trans* gender variability must not only interrogate hegemonic epistemological frames, but thereby also be as solid and as fluid, as binary and as nonbinary, as trans people themselves.

Trans: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* appears at a crucial juncture in trans history. The work of trans liberation requires a certain faithfulness to the trans community, in all its multiplicity and across all its generations. I appreciate Halberstam's evident love of the trans

community, and his efforts to legitimate as much as to challenge it. More fundamentally, however, I am grateful to all who, to cite C. Riley Snorton, "have made new names and found new modes of naming," "forged different ways of being and methods for inhabiting the world" (Snorton 2017, 199). This is the work we still have left to do.

Acknowledgments

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¹ In referring to Halberstam throughout this review, I alternate the pronouns "he" and "she." I do so to honor his note, "On Pronouns," which he posted to his website years ago and republished at

the back of this book. There, she writes, "the back and forth between he and she sort of captures the form that my gender takes nowadays" (153).

² For more on the term "cisgender," see Enke 2013; Aultman 2014.

³ For more on the term "agender," see Nicolazzo 2017, 165; Stryker 2017, 12.

⁴ For a critique of this move, see Bettcher 2007.

⁵ This is strangely inconsistent with Halberstam's theoretical insistence that trans* is beyond the binary (4).