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Female masculinity : an interview with Jack Halberstam

Judith Jack Halberstam is the author of *Female Masculinity* (1998), *The Drag King Book* (1999), *In a Queer Time and Place : Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), Professor of English and Director of The Center for the Feminist Research at USC (University of Southern California, Los Angeles).

First of all, you wrote all your books under the name of Judith. How would you like us to call you in the review ?

Jack Halberstam.

So, Jack, your book *Female Masculinity* celebrates its 10th Anniversary this year, and is more topical than ever. Despite this fact, it hasn't been translated into French yet. Do you have any idea why the French speaking part of Europe seems to be hesitant or even resistant to unconventional academic research on gender ?

Thanks for that question ! I think queer theory in general as had a cold reception in the French speaking parts of Europe. It seems too particular, too embodied. But then again, lots of amazing work in French never gets translated into English. There is a logic to academic publishing that is hard to appreciate from the outside. Luckily

Female Masculinity has been translated into Spanish by Javier Saez and that was a wonderful surprise to me.

The work of Judith Butler demonstrates that gender is a ritualized performance, a photocopy without original, which allows us to question the traditional equivalence between sex and gender, and gender as a natural social consequence of sex. Your book *Female Masculinity* seems to follow the same critical direction. Could you please tell us some more about it ? Feminist criticism in general worked hard to deconstruct the notion of femininity. So how come you ended up questioning the production of masculinity (especially the drag king scene) ?

Butler's work was foundational to my own but she and I work at different levels of abstraction. Butler is primarily a philosopher so she is asking big questions about ontology and so on. I am primarily a cultural theorist and so I try to mix thick description with gender theory and then stir it together with a little humor. You are right that feminist theory worked hard to deconstruct the notion of femininity but they did not mean « femininity » as in the style of gender associated with women ; they meant the experience of being a woman. I am really interested in why and how feminism could make the notion of the social construction of gender so central to the entire enterprise and then turn around and scorn the idea of cross-gender identification ! Part of my work began as an answer to certain forms of feminist theory that have set themselves up against gender variance. This is far less common within feminism today and so that may date my book a little bit.

As a concept and critical tool, what does « female masculinity » mean ? In another interview, you said that this concept « challenges the notion that genders are symmetrical ». Would you care to develop that further?

Female masculinity is a way of describing a particular version of gender variance in the female body. Much of the work on gender variance is modeled on male to female crossings and so female masculinity, at the time I wrote the book, filled a huge gap in the literature. In terms of the asymmetry of gender, here I am really citing Eve Sedgwick who originally pointed out that even though « male » and « female » are set up as « opposites », they are neither opposite nor even symmetrical. In fact the myth of hetero complementarity is a huge part of heteronormativity – i.e. people are really taken by this idea that the man and the women together complete each other.

Nowadays *the sexual difference as an irreducible dichotomy is still an unavoidable pitfall in the feminist critique and gender studies as well as in everyday life. Does the concept of female masculinity allow us to generate paradigmatic dislocations that question the sexual difference binary ?*

The concept of female masculinity allows us to see that gender binaries both fail and are unavoidable. In other words, the gender binary, the idea that there is only male and female and if you are not one you are the other, rarely describes the entire spectrum of gender identifications. It rarely describes the gender identifications in a single family or group or room ! But at the same time, that binary structures even

what deviates from the binary. And so, while you may identify outside of the binary, you are nonetheless interpellated by it, identified within it. And so gender variance takes the form of eccentric mixing or crossing. I think some gender theorists have been quite taken with the utopian notion that you can maybe sidestep the binary or get beyond gender binaries – early work by Gayle Rubin suggested as much and Kate Bornstein has made a career out of the concept that one might choose to be neither male nor female. But in the end, we can no more choose to opt out of any system of classification than we can decide in advance how every person we meet will read out genders.

You say you use a queer methodology : « a combination of textual criticism, ethnography, historical survey, archival research, and the production of taxonomies. » It's this last point that I'm interested in here. Naming the unspeakable gives existence and visibility to it in the public sphere. But categories are also often understood as a means of social regulation, determinism and exclusion, as far as they are defined as categories of identification. Why then advocate this proliferation of taxonomies ?

Great questions and one that I am still torn about. Transgender theorist Dean Spade has written in convincing and compelling ways about the forms of regulation that trans people are subject to on account of the versions of governmentality that operate through the techniques of naming and classification. However, I don't think you can evade a system of classification once it is operable. You can jam the system, proliferate difference within the system and make classification itself a kind of strategy of resistance. Plus, no one technique of management is simply conservative or revolutionary, context is everything. Some acts of naming allow people to develop a language for resistance, others make them available for forms of legal discipline that they otherwise escaped.

You wrote a chapter on what you call the « bathroom problem ». The public toilet is still a place of public intimacy where the gender anxiety is at its highest and where the users' social and sexual intelligibility must be crystal clear. Lately, on transgender students' demand, the University of Manchester (UK) renamed their toilets. Ladies and gents are now called toilets and toilets with urinals. I think it's a good thing that at last the focus has moved from the users' gender to the gendered functionality of the object itself. What do you think about it ?

I wish everyday that there were other ways of signifying « bathroom » and so the University of Manchester tactic sounds great to me. I occasionally go to conferences where there are unisex bathrooms, and it is such a relief. I was just at the airport on Bogota, Colombia and when you go through customs, as in some other cities, you have to line up as « men » and « women ». About ten women tried to tell me I was in the wrong line. And of course I was. Unfortunately, going into the men's line would not have resolved the problem. I think we have to move away from the universal division of anonymous humanity into men and women, male and female. There are so many reasons not to define humanity according to this one misleading opposition.

Of course ! What topics have you been working on lately ?

I have been working on failure, stupidity, forgetfulness and incoherence and unintelligibility. It is for a new book on negative epistemologies tentatively titled : « Dude, what's my theory ? ». It will be published by Duke University Press. I am also working on a small book on bats for Reaktion Press and another one, a manifesto on the relations between feminism and transgenderism, for the Feminist press.

Is there a book that you would recommend to our readers ?

Oh, wow ! Only one ? Ok here are five : *Many Headed Hydra* by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker – one of the most profoundly original histories of anti-capitalist resistance ; *Black Marxism* by Cedric Robinson – a brilliant reading of history, philosophy and culture from the critical perspective of a radical black tradition ; *Seeing Like a State* by James Scott – it addresses those big questions you asked about classification and recognition ; *Lose Your Mother* by Saidiya Hartman – one of the best academic memoirs ever and a meditation on disappointment as one of the many legacies of slavery ; and finally, my girlfriend's book, *Where Memory Dwells* by Macarena Gomez-Barris – a beautiful sociology of memory practices in post-Pinochet Chile.

And, last question, in one sentence, what does « queer » mean to you ?

Queer is the art of elevating perversion to philosophy.