

Book Review Symposium – Queer Geographies

Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. ISBN: 9780520292680 (cloth); ISBN: 9780520292697 (paper); ISBN: 9780520966109 (ebook)

There is now constant media attention directed toward transgender people – namely celebrities or children – because, as history and ratings both show, they make for good entertainment and statesmanship (intentional pronoun choice). The last few years have seen a steady growth in trans geographies and, more so, trans studies more broadly, fields related to and not distinct from queer theory and LGBTQ studies. As one of the most well-known trans studies authors, Jack Halberstam, writes in his new book *Trans**, that embodiment is “a series of ‘stopovers’ in which the body is lived as an archive rather than a dwelling, and architecture is experienced as productive of desire and difference rather than just framing space” (p. 24, drawing on Crawford 2010).¹ As such, trans studies scholarship has much to offer geography, a field whose critical scholarship is deeply steeped in a feminist tradition that, like many others, has long relied on a binary model of gender. While the tides are turning, many geographers will require a series of texts to connect to and understand the breadth and depth of the burgeoning field of trans studies in order to further the field of geography, particularly the study of bodily geographies. A literature studies, cultural studies and American studies scholar, and queer theorist, Halberstam has written one of those books: *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*.

*Trans** is best described as a thematic literature review with theoretical insights. The book ties together academic studies, current and historic events, memoirs, activisms, films, performances, and political debates regarding trans lives, largely based in the United States. Halberstam presents a thematic account of the issues and inequalities faced by gender non-

¹ Halberstam uses all pronouns, and I use her/him/their pronouns fluidly throughout this review.

conforming and gender non-binary people generally, as well as those who identify as or are labeled as transgender specifically. His project is:

... to chart the undoing of certain logics of embodiment. When logic that fixes bodily form to social practice comes undone, when narratives of sex, gender, and embodiment loosen up and become less fixed in relation to truth, authenticity, originality, and identity, then we have the space and the time to imagine bodies otherwise. (p.xii)

Given its subtitle, “A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability”, I found the book to be less quirky, but a quick and informative read, coming in at a mere 154 pages (plus references). Even with the book’s geographical shortcomings, the work is a key contribution for this moment from which others will build. The length and accessible-yet-thoughtful prose make it an exceptionally great text for undergraduates, graduate students, and advanced scholars alike. The text is divided into six chapters, a preface, and a conclusion.

Halberstam opens his book with two chapters on the most popular and well-researched trans studies topics: language and bodies. He describes how the norms, terms, and even modes of desire available to the public were long governed largely by experts in botany, anthropology, and sexology – to which I add: geography – and are now shaped if not defined by experts in psychology, social work, and the academy. The author aptly notes that “one of the biggest innovations of the past two decades in relation to gendered expression indeed has been the production, circulation, and usage of just such a vernacular language for non-normative gender and sexual expression” (p.10).

North American countries and other “developed” nation-states have portrayed and produced trans people as deviants, perverts, pedophiles, murderers, or, often, the unapologetically murdered or suicided for decades. More recently, Halberstam points out that certain white, middle-class, able-bodied “gender-ambiguous bodies have been swept into colonial logics of difference” (p.27) so that certain trans bodies – often those that take hormones

and purchase expensive surgeries – are labeled as “real” or “true”, reinstating the racial and class privilege of these groups. In their well-known 2005 *Social Text* special issue, “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?”, David Eng, Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz asked what is queer or radical about the increasingly homonormative politics of the lesbian and gay movement. Over a decade later, Halberstam takes up a similar question in his third chapter, “Becoming Trans*”, to attend to the course of trans politics, focusing especially on what *Time* dubbed the “transgender tipping point” in 2014. The *Time* cover story (which featured *Orange Is the New Black* star Laverne Cox) helped “transgender” become a household word. Halberstam poignantly remarks:

If “queer” ... was the marker of a politics of sex and gender that exceeded identity and gestured toward a critique of state power and assimilationist goals, we could say the term “trans*” marks a politics based on a general instability of identity and oriented toward social transformation, not political accommodation. (p.50)

As in all efforts to “normalize” otherness, Halberstam encourages scholars and activists alike to celebrate and yet remain wary of new regimes of transgender rights, visibility, and recognition in order to “resist some of the streamlining effects of this recognition and ask what price will be paid and by whom for this new visibility” (p.46).

While Halberstam says they do not wish to examine “the specific experiences of a generation of gender-questioning people”, this fixation inevitably shapes their text as they repeatedly explore “under what conditions the trans* body becomes legible, recognizable, and even lovable or desirable” (p.70). The next two chapters bridge an attention to queer children and youth by reiterating the breakdown between generations of trans people, what I read as groups that are broadly referred to today as children, college-aged millennials, and Generation X adults. Most especially, neoliberal engines attempt to incorporate and sell to the transgender child (and their parents) a portrayal of trans children “as a victim in need of protection, a minor in need of

advocacy, or a patient in need of care” (p.53). With trans children now able to take hormones and undergo surgeries that put them “in the right body” as they grow up (as the biopolitical narrative goes), Halberstam points out the widening gulf between them and adult trans activists as their desires are instead rerouted through their often non-trans parents.

She also recalls pro-trans Reed College students’ 2016 protest against a showing of the 1999 film *Boys Don’t Cry* by the film’s director, a movie which has long been regaled for its portrayal of the final days, rape, and violent murder of rural transgender youth Brandon Teena (see Halberstam 2016). While admitting that the film failed to account for the life and murder of African-American, disabled Phillip DeVine who died as well that day, Halberstam defends the film. He uses this protest as an example of “how hard it can be to share activist goals across different generations of people who experience their marginalized identities very differently and who may or may not be able to access and identify with the experiences of those who came before or after them” (p.105). What remains to be asked and learned then is what a different generation can teach one another, and where compromises if not new understandings must grow to create that understanding.

As *Trans** lays out in its final chapter, the tensions between feminist activism and theory and contemporary political alliances often lay unaddressed or in a painful mess. Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire* (1979) set the transphobic tone of much of white feminism, as did the refusal of trans women at the popular, annual feminist gathering, Michigan Womyn’s Folk Festival. Halberstam calls upon trans theorists today to build coalitions with this group and instead “wage battle against the violent imposition of economic disparity and forcefully oppose a renewed and open investment in white supremacy and American imperial ambition transacted through the channels of globalization” (p.126).

Even while I would happily hand out this book as an introductory reader to geographical scholars who are not knowledgeable about trans studies – or even those who oppose trans studies or the existence of trans people – the book is not without flaws. Halberstam admits the US-focus of his text does reproduce “transgenderism as a Euro-American phenomenon and as a creation of

a liberal democracy” (p.38). It is unclear why she does not seek to intervene in this limitation and instead reproduces this same narrowing trend.

Further, Halberstam uses the contested “trans*” throughout their text, without recalling any of the debates about its use. As trans writer and performer Julia Serano (2015) notes, those who encouraged that only trans* be used to encompass all other terms committed what she calls an act of “word-sabotage”, an insinuation “that certain terms are suspect or problematic on the basis that they are supposedly not as liberatory or inclusive as the term being championed”. Halberstam does not seek to erase any identities or terms but he does grant trans-with-an-asterisk a Sisyphean series of tasks that imply that other identities/terms do not do the same work. They write that using trans* allows us, first, to embrace “a politics of transitivity”, arguing, second, that it “more accurately captures the provisional nature of sex reassignment”, and, third, that “given the rifts between generations of activists ... [it] can be used to open up dialogue, difficult though it may” (p. xiii, 27, 106). Thus, it reads that the asterisk – rather than trans lives, art, writing, politics, economies, and experience in and of themselves – is left doing all of the work to refuse being “a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity” (p.4). In fact, the focus on the asterisk reads exactly as what Halberstam warns us against: “trying to fight power by battling over the relations between signifiers and signifieds while leaving the structures of signification itself intact” (p.16).

Near the end of his book, Halberstam asks: “When the male-female binary crumbles, what new constellations of alliance and opposition emerge?” (p.108). A mere 13 papers at the 2018 American Association of Geographers annual meeting mentioned the word “transgender” in their sessions, abstracts and/or titles; the number dropped to 12 in 2019. The binary has not crumbled at the AAG, in the field, or in most disciplines, but certainly Halberstam’s book may help some of us get there.

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