

Open to Possibilities: Gender Variability and the Importance of the Asterisk

BY NANCY M. LEWIS

Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. University of California Press, 2018. (American Studies Now: Critical Histories of the Present, Book 3.) 178 pp. notes. bibl. pap., \$18.95, ISBN 978-0520292697.

The struggle of naming has vexed Western academics since the 19th century. It is fitting, in referencing that time of intense classifying and cataloging, that Jack Halberstam is placing emphasis on the asterisk (*) as a way of opening up categories of gender variability. Not unfamiliar to the librarian, the asterisk is a tool used in searching to locate varied spellings of words. By highlighting this typographical character in the term *trans**, Halberstam underscores the need for broadening our thinking about gender variability.

Halberstam, currently serving as a visiting professor of gender studies and English at Columbia University, has a distinguished career investigating queer theory, gender variance, and popular culture. In this book, he continues to develop ideas mentioned in his prior publications.¹ But here he also references the works of many other queer, transgender, and feminist theorists, such as Judith Butler, Kara Keeling, José Estaban Muñoz, Tavia Nyong'o, and Julia Serano, to name only a few.

Halberstam posits that the time is ripe to rethink the labels we use for gender variability and expand the concepts that have been tied to normative structures of gender, medicalization, and the body. Many ideas currently held by the general public stem from a Western representation that privileges a white, affluent, medicalized story. Halberstam suggests that the term *trans** allows us “to think in new and different ways about what it means to claim a body” (p. 50) and how this body can be represented.

Gender variability is a controversial subject in itself, but Halberstam explicitly addresses the current controversy between some feminist activists and transgender feminism. Stating that the groups are more alike than different in their activist goals, he suggests moving beyond exclusive territorial arguments to work for common goals: “[W]e need to situate sexual and gender minorities carefully rather than claiming any predetermined status

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of precarity or power” (p. 128). Another controversy deals with the apparent increase in gender-variable children: “The transgender child raises questions about whether new modes of gendered embodiment pose any challenge at all to cultural and social norms” (p. 56). Halberstam is concerned that changes in mentorship (mainstream parents of gender-variable children, for example — rather than other members of the gender-variable community — being the primary or even only guides in these children’s lives) have the potential both to disconnect young gender-variable individuals from the historical struggle and to encourage young people to normalize into a binary gender system.

More than just an account of gender variability, this book provides suggestions for reframing our perceptions of the gendered body and opens up tantalizing possibilities for the future. This is an essential purchase for all libraries serving gender studies programs at all levels.

Note

1. See, for instance, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York University Press, 2005); *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011); and *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Beacon Press, 2012).

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