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Book Review


Judith Halberstam’s analysis of gender, and more particularly masculinity, begins by rejecting the idea that masculinity is the social, cultural, and political expression of maleness. Throughout her book, she demonstrates the necessity of severing what is often understood as an essential connection between men and masculinity in order to allow for the recognition of a past and present of masculinities embodied by women. While she briefly focuses on other forms of minority masculinities to demonstrate that “masculinity does not always and everywhere constitute superiority,”(78) most of the book is centered on masculinities in women that are associated with sexual variance.

This book is valuable in light of the many recent studies on white male masculinities that, while emphasizing the plurality of masculinities, fail to see masculinity as an historical production created by both males and females. Halberstam seeks to and successfully manages to demonstrate the complexity of masculinities as they are and have been performed by women. She accomplishes this through a “queer” or scavenger methodology that is forged from available disciplinary methods, but is not restricted by notions of disciplinary coherence. This methodology refuses to make a distinction between “the truth of
sexual behavior and the fiction of textual analysis” through combining textual criticism, ethnography, historical survey, and archival research to produce information on subjects who have been excluded from traditional studies on human behavior (10, 12). Following Eve K. Sedgwick, Halberstam develops and utilizes what she terms a “perversely presentist” model of historical analysis that seeks to “avoid the trap of simply projecting contemporary understandings back in time,” through actively questioning and denaturalizing “what we think we know about the present” (54). Halberstam’s study of historical formations of female masculinities also utilizes Judith Butler’s notion that it is “permanently unclear” what the sign “lesbian” signifies (54). For Halberstam, lesbianism or prelesbianism as a category for understanding masculinity in women of the past is inadequate because it forces us to understand sexual and gender deviance of the past only in terms that correspond with the present, thus making it impossible to see the multiple, and not necessarily related, masculinities women have produced and embodied. By destabilizing contemporary understandings of gender and recognizing that our current taxonomies are not specific enough, she believes new gender categories can be created and the multiplicity of female masculinity of the past and present can be made legible.

Halberstam explains that her project is “a seriously committed attempt to make masculinity safe for women and girls” (268). Her work of making masculinity safe for females is undertaken through rereadings of masculinity as it was performed by women of the 19th and early 20th centuries, such as the writers Anne Lister and Radclyffe Hall, and as it is performed by butches, stone butches and drag kings. In addition, Halberstam buttresses her argument with a chapter surveying fifty years of cinematic representations female masculinity. In her most compelling chapter, entitled “Transgender Butch: Butch / FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum,” she shows the urgency of making new taxonomies for understanding female masculinity in light of the recent medical categorization of female-to-male transsexuality in Western discourse, which siphons gender variance out of the category of homosexuality and into transsexuality. She argues that the metaphor of “migrating to the right body from the wrong body” serves to further pathologize female masculinity as it “leaves the politics of stable gender identities and therefore stable gender hierarchies, completely intact” (173). For Halberstam, it becomes imperative that we continue to develop ways of understanding the range and specificity of masculinity in female bodies to reflect the propagation of essentialist notions of transsexuality as a solution for gender deviance.

This book offers scholars of gender and culture rich new insights into the complexities of masculinity produced and expressed by women. *Female Masculinity* marks a crucial contribution to not only our understanding of masculinity and gender, but also to our awareness of the importance of recognizing and enabling masculinity in women.