4-15-2000


Melinda Spencer  
*University of Kentucky*  
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.09.19

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure

Part of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License.

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.09.19  
Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol9/iss1/19

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Theory at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.
book however, that the average cover weighs at least 250 pounds.

So this is a book to admonish myths then? Not quite, the scholarly and writerly analysis of Mimi Melnick coupled with the photographic documentation of more than 200 North American manholes by her late husband Robert Melnick proliferate the magic of these urban sphincters. Each manhole cover is held in place by a frame or ring. These two pieces are ‘married’ or permanently paired in the foundry for a noiseless, non-rocking fit. The notion of the cover and ring ‘marriage’ alerts us to the manhole cover’s leakage and loss of gender. Some of them have been renamed personhole covers and other assorted monikers by various city bureaus that seek to abolish sexism. Recently, manhole covers have been specifically designed to prevent the entrapment of spiked-heeled shoes. The issue of gender and masculinity in the book is kept largely underground and this seems a pity given the manliness of the manhole cover and its prevention or fear of leaking fluids.

*Manhole Covers* is a testament to designs that echo Piet Mondrian, William Morris, or the Picasso style figures on the Seattle Water Bureau covers. A cover by the Snead & Co. Iron Works, located in Louisville, Kentucky is embossed on the cover of the book, with the title and the Melnick’s names carefully blended into the book/manhole cover’s text. This book, I am sure, has given immense joy to St. Cloacina “the renowned goddess of the sewers.” This book prevents the reader from an abysmal fall into the sewers of ignorance about the manhole cover topic. Though many of the ornate Stygian doorways are disappearing fast, Melnick’s book suddenly makes the manhole cover appear in the quotidian *mise en scène* below one’s feet.

---

**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 deviancy 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 deflect 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.