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J. Jack Halberstam

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Masculinity without men. In *Female Masculinity* Jack Halberstam takes aim at the protected status of male masculinity and shows that female masculinity has offered a distinct alternative to it for well over two hundred years. Providing the first full-length study on this subject, Halberstam catalogs the diversity of gender expressions among masculine women from nineteenth-century pre-lesbian practices to contemporary drag king performances.

Through detailed textual readings as well as empirical research, Halberstam uncovers a hidden history of female masculinities while arguing for a more nuanced understanding of gender categories that would incorporate rather than pathologize them. He rereads Anne Lister's diaries and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* as foundational assertions of female masculine identity. He considers the enigma of the stone butch and the politics surrounding butch/femme roles within lesbian communities. He also explores issues of transsexuality among "transgender dykes"---lesbians who pass as men---and female-to-male transsexuals who may find the label of "lesbian" a temporary refuge. Halberstam also tackles such topics as women and boxing, butches in Hollywood and independent cinema, and the phenomenon of male impersonators.

Female Masculinity signals a new understanding of masculine behaviors and identities, and a new direction in interdisciplinary queer scholarship. Illustrated with nearly forty photographs, including portraits, film stills, and drag king performance shots, this book provides an extensive record of the wide range of female masculinities. And as Halberstam clearly demonstrates, female masculinity is not some bad imitation of virility, but a lively and dramatic staging of hybrid and minority genders.

Female Masculinity Details

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From Reader Review Female Masculinity for online ebook

COME_TO_THE_DARK_SIDE says

Es un poco viejo pero algunas partes valen la pena. Básicamente la introducción y algún capítulo suelto, el resto es repetitivo y mal argumentado. La parte que más me ha molestado es cuando habla sobre hombres trans. Además ya avisa de que en un anterior libro muchas personas trans han criticado y se han quejado de sus comentarios y entonces va y sigue con la misma basura.

Sara Jaye says

Groundbreaking, awesome, and unfortunately, subtly (and on occasion not-so-subtly) less than glowing about femmes! Get with it, people: you CAN glorify one identity without putting others down.

Angela says

To anyone in technical or hard science fields, "social science" is a contradiction at best, and sociology and queer studies are social science's less rigorous younger siblings. At one point near the beginning, Halberstam debates whether the more scientific approach to studying female masculinity is surveying people in a nonrandom way and subjectively interpreting the results--and here you say, OK, finally someone is rejecting this completely flawed methodology as legitimate research--or, wait for it...watching a lot of movies. I don't think I'll be spoiling the plot to point out that the movies won.

This aside, there's a lot of interesting history of gender ambiguity and the choices available to women who didn't fit in the limited available roles open to them in and before the mid-20th century. The exploration of film could be made more concise or include more examples, but it's good information as well. I was disappointed that Halberstam's research seems to focus, however, exclusively on women and transmen who date women. It might not be interesting to Halberstam, but I was a little disappointed to see masculinity (which, oddly enough, never seems to be defined by any of the books on it) regarded as mostly defined by sexuality and outward characteristics. No space whatsoever is given to straight, cis-women performing traditionally male careers or otherwise adopting traditionally male roles despite their lack of gender ambiguity in other areas.

At the same time as she's completely ignored straight women, though, I have a feeling that Halberstam will have managed to upset transmen pretty severely. She doesn't really touch on identity issues much at all, which seems like it would be an important point in creating the boundaries of the "border wars" between butch lesbians and FTM transsexuals. It seems like the easiest way to find out "what people are" is to ask them, and actually pay attention to the responses. The resistance to self-definition is odd in a context that is generally supportive of various deviant gender expressions.

In any case, the academics in this field will find *Female Masculinity* an interesting book; to most other people it will probably read like the PhD dissertation I suspect it was. There are interesting points here, and it will slightly change how you view many characters in film (most recently for me, Cate Blanchett in Robin Hood), but I had to force myself through it for book club's sake.

Madeleine says

canonical! fun/sad/sexy/opening up possibilities in language/queerness

Scott Moore says

Halberstam makes some generalizations about the slippage between butch dyke and FTM identity that come off as troubling (even though her blurring of butch/transman resonated strongly for me personally). Perhaps it was her style or her lack of "theory power" as writer, but I remember that her tone towards female masculinity - "trans guy, butch dyke, we're really all the same!" - bothered me at times. I did benefit, however, from her discussion about female masculinity and film.

Carrie says

I think that part of the reason that I didn't love this book as much as I had hoped is because it's a bit outdated. It was published in 1998, and certainly the queer and gender equality movements have changed dramatically over the past decade. Had I read this book closer to when it had been written, it may have resonated with me more.

Female Masculinity is incredibly well-researched and includes a lot of fascinating information about the history of female masculinity. Several chapters focus on pre-twentieth century female masculinity, which I found particularly interesting, as most of the information in those chapters were completely new to me.

My favorite chapter is the second to last chapter, which explores masculinity as performance and the drag king culture. Halberstam did an excellent job of highlighting the differences between the ways that masculinity and femininity are performed and how these performances are illustrated in drag culture. I've always been a fan of drag, but I am much less familiar with the drag king world than I am with the drag queen world, and reading about "kinging," as Halberstam calls it, has made me very interested in learning more.

It's also important to mention that Halberstam's writing is very approachable, and, as a whole, Female Masculinity is one of the most accessible academic texts I've ever read. It's very theoretical, of course, but it contains much less jargon than other books I've read on similar topics.

My biggest problem with Female Masculinity is that it exclusively explored masculinity in queer women. While the relationship between female masculinity and lesbianism is critical and worthy of extensive examination, I was hoping to read about a more diverse assortment of female masculine identities. One of my biggest pet peeves is when gender identity and sexual orientation are conflated, and I felt that the exclusive focus on lesbianism perpetuated that kind of conflation. The implication that only queer women are masculine is incredibly problematic, and though I don't think Halberstam *meant* to imply that, it does come across that way at points.

I was also troubled by the way Halberstam compared butch female identity with trans male identity. Again, I don't think Halberstam meant to imply that masculine-presenting women and transgender men have the same identities and struggles, but there are moments where the arguments come across that way. Since trans men are men, and not masculine women, I felt the comparisons between trans men and butch women to be oversimplified and not entirely accurate.

Overall, I enjoyed Female Masculinity, but it is not the definitive text on the subject I was hoping it would be. I am curious to see what else has been written on the subject since this book's release.

Aryeh says

I've taken months to read this one, and taken the time to watch a number of the movies and read a few of the other books Halberstam references. This book is equivalent to a graduate/PhD level semester long class. It's dense, it's logical, it's no-nonsense at the same time as being masterfully written, it takes into consideration past writings (both of the author and others), and it offers a few bold insights. Even though it was first published in 1998, the vast majority of the book remains completely up to date. Halberstam is an incredible writer and an extremely detail oriented teacher. Highly recommended, but not for the faint of heart or anyone who just wants a basic introduction. Take the time to fully understand this one, it's worth it.

Emma Sea says

Wow, fifteen years old. In many ways it's kind of depressing that, in general, our culture hasn't moved beyond a gender binary.

I always had three main peeves with Halberstam. One is zir insistence that "masculinity" is not a synonym for "men or maleness" (p. 13). Well, yes it bloody is. No matter how much we want to challenge language and forge reclaimings, masculinity is, in our culture, a synonym for maleness. Therefore as soon as one talks about female masculinity, one *is* talking about women/transgendered/butches/men/whoever behaving in a way that is (in our culture) manly. Throughout the book Halberstam discusses behaviour as feminine and masculine. I would be happier renaming behaviours in a way that is separate from gender, rather than trying to reframe masculinity (which seems akin to banging a head against a brick wall).

Secondly, hear my hollow laughter as Halberstam discusses the gendering of children.

"I believe that society has altered its conception of the appropriate way to raise girls; indeed, a plethora of girl problems, from eating disorders to teenage pregnancy to low intellectual ambitions, leave many parents attempting to hold femininity at bay for their young girls. Cultivating femininity in girls at a very early age also has the unfortunate effect of sexualizing them and even inducing seductive mannerisms in pre-teen girls. The popularity of the tomboy is one indication that many parents are willing to cultivate low levels of masculinity in their female children rather than undergo the alternative."

Even back in 1998 it seemed to me to be incredibly naive to believe that little girls were being raised in a more gender-neutral way, and that this trend would intensify. I'm sure Halberstam too is choking on zir words when zie watches Dance Moms (watch the routine in the second video down. If you can stomach it**).

Thirdly, and most relevantly to this book, I utterly refute Halberstam's assertion that:

"Female masculinity seems to be at its most threatening when coupled with lesbian desire" but "hetero female masculinity . . . represents an acceptable degree of female masculinity."

Halberstam's examples of hetero female masculinity are Linda Hamilton in Terminator 2, and Sigourney Weaver in Alien/s. It's a goddamn superpower: watch Halberstam sweep aside challenging hetero female masculinity in less than a paragraph. Zie picks here very specific forms of "female masculinity:" ones that explicitly do not threaten because they are still feminine *enough* (I mean, they're ones created by Hollywood: you don't get much more manufactured and appropriately consumable than that). There's no need to divide and conquer, Halberstam, there's quite enough disapproval to go around female masculinity of all sexual orientations.

What's even more annoying is that having made this distinction, Halberstam accuses others of mis-aligning female masculinity with lesbianism: *"by making female masculinity equivalent to lesbianism . . . or by reading it as proto-lesbianism awaiting a coming community, we continue to hold female masculinity apart."*

With all these criticisms, this was an important book, that all interested in gender should read (although I liked the suggestion of one reviewer on GR, that it's better cited than read).

If there's one thing I'm grateful to Halberstam for it is critiquing the 1990s framing of identifying as transgender as "being in the wrong body." Halberstam states, *"The idea that only transsexuals experience the pain of a 'wrong body' shows an incredible myopia about the trials and tribulations of many varieties of . . . embodiment. It . . . efficiently constructs a model of 'right body' experience that applies, presumably, to [other people]."*

"If the borderlands are uninhabitable for some transsexuals who imagine that home is just across the [gender] border, imagine what a challenge they present to those subjects who do not believe that such a home exists, either metaphorically or literally. [Gender theorist Jay] Prosser's cartography of gender relies on a belief in the two territories of male and female, divided by a flesh border and crossed by surgery and endocrinology . . . Some bodies are never at home, some bodies cannot simply cross from A to B, some bodies recognize and live with the inherent instability of identity."

It's why I get annoyed by Halberstam for talking about gender territories "in between" and "geographies of ambiguity" at the same time as saying things like *"the category of stone butch lies on the boundary between lesbian and transgendered."* I don't find categories and boundaries a very useful way of re-envisioning gender.

Still, a great re-read.

**Bonus creep factor: check out the male judge getting a camera out to take photos at 00:40.

Eddie says

!!!!!!

Yoel says

Basically, "Where's my phallus?" Butch, please.

Stef Rozitis says

This book at times irritated me, but often interested me. I learned a new word "tribadism" (google it but not in a public place like I made the mistake of doing). Many of the observations are true, and as she reaches what seem like conclusions she seems to trouble them enough to add complexity, depth and honesty- there are no answers.

At times it seemed to me the idea of "female masculinity" was built upon essentialist assumptions (although at other times Halberstam deconstructed that). I thought the connection between female masculinity and feminism was a bit contrived and the connection between female masculinity and making any real change to the negative excesses of white male masculinity was wishful thinking. The book ended weakly.

Nevertheless it is rich with complexity, thought provoking and full of types and versions of women you may never have thought of. I sort of found myself in there, not directly but at its best the text allowed the reader to differ from the types it was presenting. Initially I read it from a lgbtqi perspective but in fact I think it would be a useful book for any women, even very deliberately "feminine"/femme straight women.

If you can cope with the idealisation and almost idolisation of the butch (I realise where it comes from but still...)

Anyway it never bored me...

Jess P says

sometimes, (subversive) gender scholarship feels like drinking too much coffee: i know maybe i should slow down, but it just tastes too good!

Tina says

Given the fact that this book was published in 1998, Halberstam does a great job discussing masculinity among women, dykes, transsexual men. It stroke a chord with me when I read it.

Some don't like her operating of the language when discussing trans identity, but I think this was a result also of the time when the book was written - since then, the language and discourse has much progressed and Halberstam's subsequent book on transgender/transsexuality (2005, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*) proves that her thoughts and analysis still stand, regardless of the language she

operated with in Female Masculinity. For me, these critiques are of minor importance.

Jamie Bernthal says

It was hard to find an appropriate star rating, because this book was timely and important, and I like citing it, but at the same time it's disappointing and I don't like reading it. Halberstam is an excellent figurehead for queer theory, a genderf*cking barely academic professor who sometimes tries too hard to get down with the kids. She is famous for writing accessibly and for using unconventional primary sources - usually children's films and TV, which has led to wonderful lines in later books like "Spongebob aside, we might consider...".

Female Masculinity, Halberstam's first book (she is Judith Halberstam for this book, not J. Jack Halberstam, the name attached to some later projects), appeared in 1998 and is symptomatic of the explosion of interest in queer and gender studies in the 1990s. Uncoupling masculinity and maleness, Halberstam suggests that women can be masculine without compromising their womanliness: in other words, inventing new gendered codes undoes the power that gender holds over sex. Like a first novel, this first book has so much to do, but it hampered by the author trying too hard. Here she is trying to write like Judith Butler, and sources are pretty much on the Radclyffe Hall level.

Halberstam summarises this project in later work. So perhaps it's best to read some of that. Always at the nexus of queer theory and sociology, Halberstam's work remains dynamic and relevant. This book is a brave and important beginning, but unlike Butler's *Gender Trouble*, it deserves to be more cited than read.

Kythera Anevern says

Thus far, this title is extremely heavy reading. Halberstam's style is brutally academic and dense (sometimes such that I wonder if there was a word count that the author was striving desperately to meet). It's rather off-putting to have to slog through such heavy-handed writing to try and get at a subject I'm desperately curious about, but I'm determined to finish this book.
