



## Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

2 | 2016

Ordinary Chronicles of the End of the World

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Université Jean Moulin – Lyon III, Maison Internationale des Langues et des Cultures (MILC), 24<sup>th</sup> November 2016

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#### Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/8286>

DOI : [10.4000/transatlantica.8286](https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.8286)

ISSN : 1765-2766

#### Éditeur

AFEA

#### Référence électronique

Sophie Chapuis, « Lecture by Jack Halberstam: “Trans\*: Bodies, Gender Variance and Power” », *Transatlantica* [En ligne], 2 | 2016, mis en ligne le 02 octobre 2017, consulté le 29 avril 2021. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/8286> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.8286>

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Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 29 avril 2021.



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# Lecture by Jack Halberstam: “Trans\*: Bodies, Gender Variance and Power”

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- 1 On November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the IETT (Institut d’Études Transtextuelles et Transculturelles) welcomed Jack Halberstam<sup>1</sup>, Professor of English and Gender Studies at Columbia University. He was invited by Pierre-Antoine Pellerin, Associate Professor of American Literature at Université Jean Moulin – Lyon III. The lecture was part of a series of seminars entitled “Genre, sexualités, décolonialité”.
- 2 A prominent academic and renowned lecturer in the United States, Jack Halberstam delivered his first talk in front of a French audience composed of academics and students. It was an opportunity for him to take stock of, and reflect on, two decades of groundbreaking work about transgenderism and identity politics. Halberstam’s ambition was to assess the changes that have occurred in the representation of transgender lives and bodies at a time when transgenderism has become widely accepted and is even at risk of normalization. Surveying two decades of change, Halberstam analyzed the various mechanisms of inclusion that have dramatically increased the visibility of transgender people in the public scene, celebrating it as a sign of progress, but warning at the same time about the potential dangers it entailed. At stake is indeed the future of gender and the fate of the transgendered body which, to Halberstam, can still be perceived as a site of peril now that lines between the margins and the center have been redrawn.
- 3 While transgendered figures used to be seen as deviant and monstrous, they have now become icons featured on the covers of international magazines. Laverne Cox was the first transgender actress to appear on the cover of *Time Magazine*<sup>2</sup> in 2014 and Olympic gold medal-winning athlete Caitlyn Jenner, formerly known as Bruce Jenner, got on the front cover of *Vanity Fair*<sup>3</sup> in 2015. The latter was photographed by no less an iconic

photographer than Annie Leibovitz, who also produced a series of portraits of former soldier Chelsea Manning for the September 2017 American issue of *Vogue Magazine*<sup>4</sup>. These three examples show that transgender figures have lately been endorsed by mainstream media and mostly celebrated as glamorous and powerful people.

- 4 Because living on the edge no longer seems desirable, Halberstam voiced concern about rampant trans-normativity, which even led Donald Trump to stand for LGBT rights in his campaign, declaring at the 2016 Republican National Convention: "As your president, LGBT people, I will fight for you" – a promise he was to break less than a year later when signing, on August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017, a directive asking the U.S. military not to accept transgender men and women as recruits. Yet, Halberstam insisted on the necessity to watch out whenever transgender figures are systematically forced into the national narrative, whether by politics or by mainstream culture.
- 5 He specifically highlighted the danger it represented for children, who now have a whole lexicon allowing them to voice gender nonconformity at a very young age. Being queer used to be a disruptive element that challenged the family, but it no longer tends to be the case. Parents now stand for the rights of their children instead of letting them fend for themselves or themselves. But a child, Halberstam argued, is a figure of ambiguity and becoming and, as such, can easily shift. Transgenderism used to be an adult phenomenon until a few years ago, but today's activism largely centers on the figure of the child. Because the fight is led by parents and no longer by transgendered subjects themselves, children might grow up unaware of the past struggles and come to dis-identify with transgender history. Besides, he has lately observed a tendency to preserve norms rather than dispute them. The parents' struggle to facilitate acceptance of their children in schools and social institutions often reveals a desire to conform to heteronormative standards.
- 6 Dating the "transgender tipping point"<sup>5</sup> to the last couple of years, Halberstam's talk looked back on two decades of change and offered a survey of different aesthetic forms that have been used to represent trans\* bodies. He remembered that when he published *Female Masculinity* back in 1998, masculine women were still seen as monstrous and transgendered bodies were largely perceived as bodies in distress. Transgenderism was some exotic phenomenon that triggered the fascination of the media but failed to be understood other than as a deviance verging on insanity. This is the case in Brian De Palma's 1980 movie *Dressed to Kill* in which a psychiatrist and his transgender patient turn out to be the same person and, what is more, a murderer. Such a movie, Halberstam argued, featured the transgender body as a metaphor for unstable identities and associated transgenderism with illegibility and monstrosity.
- 7 It took a decade before some directors found new ways of representing gender transitivity. Halberstam chose three movies from the 1990s that, to him, have allowed for a remapping of gender. *The Crying Game*, directed by Neil Jordan (1992), was the first movie not to center on the character's transgenderism, but rather used transitivity as a political metaphor. Halberstam praised the movie for taking a distance from the transgender body to include it in a wider plot that engages a reflection on nationhood, race and sexuality. In this film, a black British woman who happens to be a male-bodied woman is involved in a relationship with a black soldier, but the story unfolds against the backdrop of the Northern Ireland conflict and, to Halberstam, the radicalism of the film lies in its political project.

- 8 The second movie example is the Oscar-winning *Boys Don't Cry*, directed by Kim Pierce (1999), which revolves around the true story of Brandon Teena, a trans man who was raped and murdered in 1993 at the age of twenty. The movie offers a different take on transgenderism by allowing the viewer to see through the eyes of a transgender character and adopt what Halberstam calls the "transgender gaze", a way of looking at the world *from within* the transgender body.
- 9 The last movie Halberstam analyzed was released at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It was directed and played by Harry Dodge and Silas Howard. *By Hook or by Crook* (2001) is a road movie starring two transgender characters who are on a quest and whose transitional process is more central than the actual motives of their transition. Because the movie does not focus on a single transgendered character nor explicitly mentions the gender of the two friends, the film is not about transgenderism, but rather a tale about friendship.
- 10 All three movies brought massive change in their representation of gender variant bodies and led Halberstam, in a second part of his argument, to consider other possible options to rethink gender today and find new ways of embodying gender. Since the transgender body has mostly been portrayed figuratively, Halberstam called for more abstract ways to represent it. To do so, he turned to various artists whose works provide abstract representations of the body. He examined for example the work of American artist Eva Hesse, whose sculpture "Bodies Without Organs" goes beyond the surface of the body. Since the body is unframed and has no envelope, it resists embodiment.
- 11 Using Sara Davidmann's work as a last example, Halberstam argued that the transgendered body should be considered as a fragmentary site. In *Ken. To be Destroyed* (2013-2015), British artist and photographer Sara Davidmann<sup>6</sup> uses family archives to reflect on gender variance in the Fifties. She discovered that, from the age of three, her uncle had always wished to be a woman and secretly dressed as a woman when family was away. He kept it secret from his wife, Hazel, who only learnt about it four years after they got married. Davidmann restores and sometimes reframes photographs to portray her uncle as a woman. The alteration of surfaces, frames and material is meant to point at the inherent indeterminacy of the transgendered body and leads Halberstam to defend a haptic understanding of it. A haptic perspective encourages one to see not only with their eyes, but to sense with their whole body. Since it focuses less on sight than touch, viewing is no longer limited to the visual, but depends on a variety of senses. The haptic is a form of representation that favors illegibility and welcomes indeterminacy. Halberstam's use of the word haptic highlights the constant transitioning of the transgendered body, which forever remains unfinished, like a site in construction.
- 12 The word trans\* belongs to the vocabulary of the haptic as the asterisk forbids any definite meaning: this Boolean search operator indeed leaves a blank that allows for multiple interpretations. Jack Halberstam compellingly argued in favor of the term trans\* because it resists the polarization and sheer binary between a trans man and a trans woman. Transgender is an umbrella term used to refer to people who identify as a gender other than the one that was assigned to them at birth. By contrast, trans\* opens endless possibilities for the diacritical mark is resolutely indefinite. Halberstam suggested that the asterisk might be construed as a question mark or simply a sign that emphasizes the transitioning process instead of the final form. The asterisk also aims at

encompassing different gender identities across the gender spectrum. The truncation forbids any classification process just as it refrains from naming or defining.

- 13 As the talk was delivered in the fortnight that followed Donald Trump's election, the question and answer session quickly approached the possible threats faced by trans\* people. Halberstam acknowledged that their rights could potentially be undermined but insisted on the fact that transgender people no longer represented a threat. On the contrary, white or wealthy transgendered figures like Caitlyn Jenner or Chelsea Manning have been embraced by the media as icons, but their acceptance is only partial victory for it silences other issues like incarceration, racial bias or social inequalities to mention just a few. Halberstam repeated that we should be cautious when examining these new forms of tolerance for they have not eradicated the logic of exclusion that has long presided over the history of the United States. Addressing an audience of students and academics who asked many questions about the presidential election, Halberstam lamented the fact that academics had retreated to their departments and had unfortunately been unable to communicate with non-university audience. Thus, an abyss was created between people who have received an education and those who have not, which, to him, is one among the multiple reasons that contributed to Trump's election.
- 14 Mixing references from literature, visual arts or aesthetics, Halberstam's blend resulted in a thought-provoking lecture that constantly strove to build bridges between academia and popular culture. Defining his work as counter-intuitive, Halberstam has always favored what he calls anti-disciplinary forms of knowledge production and his talk, fraught with humor and irreverence, urged for ever-more questioning and constant reexamination of existing paradigms.

## NOTES

1. Jack Halberstam is the author of five books that have not yet been translated into French. They include *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Duke UP, 1995), *Female Masculinity* (Duke UP, 1998), *In A Queer Time and Place* (NYU Press, 2005), *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke UP, 2011) and *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Beacon Press, 2012). Part of this talk comes from Halberstam's forthcoming essay *Trans\**, *A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (U of California P, forthcoming January 2018).
2. <http://time.com/132769/transgender-orange-is-the-new-black-laverne-cox-interview/> (last accessed on August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017)
3. <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2015/06/caitlyn-jenner-bruce-cover-annie-leibovitz> (last accessed on August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017)
4. <http://www.vogue.com/article/chelsea-manning-vogue-interview-september-issue-2017> (last accessed on August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017)
5. Jack Halberstam borrowed this expression from the title that accompanied *Time Magazine's* cover which featured Laverne Cox in May 2014.
6. <http://www.saradavidmann.com/ken.html> (last accessed on August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017)

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