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Gender, The First

Reflection Paper :: *Gaga Feminism* ;; 1499 words

In 2012, [J.] Jack Halberstam released vy¹ latest book through Beacon Press², *Gaga Feminism*,³ and I have to say: I *really* liked this premise. Lady Gaga as a feminist? Well, *queer* might be a more applicable term, but yeah! To me, Lady Gaga is *powerful* in the way that she is able to work within the system to critique it, to ramp up normativity to the point that it becomes abnormal, impossible to ignore. She turns pop culture against itself, exposing the necessary lack that makes it operate, and that's very postmodern and very cool. But this paper isn't about Lady Gaga, and that's because in my opinion Halberstam's book isn't really about Lady Gaga—although ve builds a framework off of the theatrical nature of her performances, Halberstam is by vy own admission less concerned with the particulars of her politics than with the greater themes of gender and sexuality in society at-large.

I'm not going to respond directly to Halberstam's actual points, because I don't find them particularly useful, and I question the utility of a criticism which engages with something its author doesn't already have a stake in.⁴ It's not my place to criticize *Gaga Feminism* because I'm not interested in *using* *Gaga Feminism*, it has no real effect on me, and if I don't like it, I can simply throw the book away. Without understanding its utility, it would be difficult for me to respond in a way that properly preserved its meaning, and—well, that's not very *productive*, is it?⁵

1. Halberstam is, to the best of my reckoning (derived mostly from this blog post ve made in 2012 [<http://jackhalberstam.com/on-pronouns/>], *rather genderqueer*, and so for the purposes of this paper, and in pursuit of greater pronoun-liberation in general, I refer to vem, quite without vy consent (although such a claim to authority places the burden of pronoun-selection on their referents and not on the people using them), with the invented pronoun ve [<http://benjam.xyz/writings/ve/>]. While this is certainly not the *only* approach to take (Halberstam vyself might appreciate one with more fluidity), it is, I believe, the most accommodating. It is, however, perhaps relevant to note that Halberstam's Facebook page, among other sources, refer to vem using the pronoun *he*.

2. A department of the Unitarian Universalist Association, for those wondering.

3. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

4. Whether they would like to or not. To be clear, we all have a stake (or perhaps *different stakes*) in the problems of white supremacy, patriarchy, and cisheteronormativity.

5. In a Foucaultian sense it might be, but usually that's not a good thing.

What I *am* interested in, and what I'm going to focus this paper on, is the way gender is conceived of and deployed in various spaces and for various aims, in Halberstam's work and elsewhere. Gender is an important aspect of Halberstam's work, and in a way that quite frankly lost me a fair bit the first time I read it. I'd like to take a closer look there, at Halberstam's conception of gender and my own, to see where those ideas converge, and where they differ. Because they *are* different (and quite so); I think that's one of the reasons I had trouble really getting behind the things ve was saying, and I think that difference is one worth exploring.

I'm going to start with mine, and in true pseudoscientific gender-theory fashion, I'm going to start from an etymological framework. Namely, with the *Sino-Tibetan Etymological Dictionary and Thesaurus*, a research project on the part of UC Berkeley, and their publication *The Tibeto-Burman Reproductive System: Toward an Etymological Thesaurus*. In it, the following short statement appears: "We are not including roots for FEMALE/WOMAN in this volume, since they seem quite independent of etyma for the 'female organs'... On the other hand, words for MALE do frequently interchange with words for the male genitals."⁶ While this is a family of languages of which English is not a part, and these reconstructions are entirely hypothetical, it is interesting that they present for us a model of gender in which women *aren't* defined by their bodies or reproductive capabilities, even as men *are*. Among other things, this posits men and women as *not necessarily mutually exclusive categories*, and the axis of gender as actually *a consolidation of two distinct methods of human categorization*.

But let's look at an example a little closer to home. The prototypical example of traditional gender genealogical approaches is the etymology of the word *woman*; that is, the Old English word *wif-man*—that first compound eventually forming the modern *wife*—which presents a conception of gender which is fundamentally tied to kinship, marriage, and ultimately patriarchy. This is doubtlessly what Halberstam has in mind when ve summarizes Gayle Rubin as follows: "The meaning of 'woman' in early human societies emerged out of the tendency of tribes and groups to create bonds with one another through the exchange of women. This 'traffic in women' then established the meaning of

6. James A. Matisoff, *The Tibeto-Burman Reproductive System: Toward an Etymological Thesaurus* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2008), 154.

womanhood within a system of ‘institutionalized heterosexuality’.”⁷ But, of course, a traffic in women depends upon a definition of womanhood which precedes it, so this history leaves something to be desired in explaining gender’s more fundamental foundational elements.

So let us look to a different English word; in a perhaps boundary-challenging move, that of *female*, from Latin *feminina*; literally, “she who suckles”. And it is important to note here that, again, we find an etymology which has nothing to do with giving birth, having a vagina, or fucking. To the contrary, our linguistic foundations for femininity come instead from a *social function*, and indeed, looking back it makes sense that a system of kinship focused on the production of children would take as its necessary precursor one which is concerned with keeping them alive.

I bring this up not in the naïve interest of finding gender’s originary formulation or culturally transcendent meaning, but because I think it has potential at opening up a new understanding of gender outside of biology, sexuality, or marriage (as someone who is polyamorous, asexual, and genderqueer, perhaps my motivations here are a bit personal). Instead, it posits a foundation of gender that is distinctly *non*-binary; that is to say, *not-woman* does not necessarily designate *man*. Indeed, you can easily imagine someone fitting within both, or neither, of these categories.

Halberstam’s evocation of gender, however, seems *precisely* concerned with kinship, sexuality, and marriage relations. Starting from Rubin and moving forward from there, my work on gender centres on the family and its varied, potentially queer, instantiations. Through this lens, the condition of gender seems precarious: As the fantasy of the nuclear family dissolves and women find themselves obtaining increased social and economic independence, Halberstam questions the social utility of manhood in the new modern family.⁸ She takes up queer parenting duos—in particular, the butch-femme lesbian couple⁹—as a means of escaping (to an extent that remains open to question) patriarchal and sexed

7. Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism*, 13.

8. Oddly, she does not extend the same line of inquiry to femininity—although, as this is a feminist text, perhaps this is not so surprising. Ibid., “The End of Men,” 41–51.

9. A distinction which perhaps *only* makes sense under the guise of marriage. Borrowing Halberstam’s rhetoric but speaking personally, and as a criticism of not individual identities but rather the way they are interpellated onto others, the system in which *I* came to understand sexual mores generally considered butch and femme as generally gross caricatures invented to resituate lesbianism back within traditional heterosexual norms. I mean, you *could* make the argument that Korrasami (*The Legend of Korra*) or Marnie-Anna (*When Marnie Was There*) are butch-femme couples, but *who would want to?* [[More on this upcoming, probably.]]

formulations of gender, insofar as they trouble mainstream conceptions of both sexual relations and parenthood.¹⁰

It is a formulation which seems less drawn out of theory than personal experience.¹¹ Discussing the text in an interview with *Lambda Literary*, Halberstam remarked that “Sometimes I get really irritated when I’m around other queer couples where one person is kind of clearly butch and the other is clearly less butch, but the butch partner is still called ‘mom.’ I think, what’s that about? Why do you want to be called mom? Nothing could be further from my desire, in parenting, than to be called mom.”¹² The gender Halberstam evokes doesn’t draw upon the performativity of Judith Butler, conceptualizations of power relations à la Foucault, and Simone de Beauvoir only makes an appearance in her criticisms of marriage. Instead, Halberstam speaks to gender as it is perceived, felt, experienced, on a regular basis, in everyday life.

And this *isn’t* a criticism. Gender is opaque in its day-to-day manifestation—its performative nature, situation within a larger structure of power, and overall historical contingency are often invisible and certainly not prominent in its initial realization. While a theoretical exploration of the mechanisms and underpinnings of gendered relationality will always have its place, the lived experience of gender as enigmatic signifier should not be discarded in this approach; nor should it be engaged with uncritically. Halberstam’s work in *Gaga Feminism* seems to speak to gender on this level, not as an abstract concept but as it is manifested within peoples’ lives: through family, conversation, and naïve childhood curiosity.

The problem with an experience-based understanding of gender, however, is that not everyone will share it. Perhaps moreso than most writing on the subject, Halberstam’s work in *Gaga Feminism* is situated within a certain time, political/social/economic/geographic location, and subjective experience, and as a dmab millennial from rural Washington State, one without children or any manner of

10. Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism*, throughout, but especially in “The Law of the Butch Father,” 57–61.

11. By intention. Halberstam expressed fears during the interview cited in this paragraph about *The Queer Art of Failure* being frustrating for some readers, and remarked that he hoped that *Gaga Feminism* would avoid this issue.

12. Sinclair Sexsmith, “Jack Halberstam: Queers Create Better Models of Success,” *Lambda Literary*, February 1, 2012, <http://www.lambdaliterary.org/interviews/02/01/jack-halberstam-queers-create-better-models-of-success/>.

relationship partner, I differ on quite a few counts, and in this respect our disconnect in understanding gender is perhaps unsurprising.¹³ Moreover, however, I think that we bring to the table different approaches and goals: mine, a conceptual framework for denaturalization and variance; vem, an everyday exploration of gender as it manifests itself—and is perceived—through popular media and culture.

This, again, is not to pass value-judgements; as I said, I don't think that's my place. But I think that an understanding of the different ways in which gender is conceptualized, related, always-already interpreted is important when looking to compare—or even comprehend—differing models and the theory surrounding them. And while a focus on popular conception does not excuse an uncritical approach, it does offer a different perspective, one more contingent on individual circumstances and focused on a narrower audience, even as it may speak all the more powerfully because of it.

13. We're also both white, in the United States, and interested in gender studies, so I guess it depends where you look.

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