

Masculinity without Men:
Review of Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1998)
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1999 saw the publication of two widely-publicized feminist studies of men, Susan Bordo's *The Male Body*, and Susan Faludi's *Stiffed*.¹ Written for a broad readership, these works emerge at the end of a decade during which academic gender studies has turned the methods of feminist, gay and lesbian inquiry to a consideration of masculinity. The scholarship on masculinity has expanded the terrain of gender and sexuality, bringing fresh insights to familiar texts, and revealing the category of straight white manhood to be something like the Wizard of Oz, a tenuous, vulnerable figure hiding out behind a screen of smoke and mirrors. Men across the disciplines have been interrogating their own masculinities, interpreting their relationships with fathers, brothers, and male friends, confessing to feelings of alienation and weakness, and sometimes productively translating those personal revelations into renewed commitments to the analysis of gender and sexuality.² At its best, this work brings new vitality to feminist questions, and suggests crucial points of contact between feminism and queer theory.³ And yet, the current rage for the study of masculinity and the sheer amount of scholarship currently being produced might give some of us pause to wonder why men—admittedly now appropriately situated and theorized—have once again become the focus of analytical attention. Too often, the study of masculinity seems to come at the expense of the study of women; its unfortunate consequence is

¹ See Susan Bordo, *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and Private* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999) and Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: W. Morrow and Co., 1999).

² For examples of the confessional impulse in writings about masculinity, see some of the essays in *Boys: Masculinities in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Paul Smith (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1996) and *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson (New York and London: Routledge, 1996). One of the best instances in which personal commitments are translated into rigorous and groundbreaking scholarship is Daniel Boyarin's *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997).

³ Indeed, a turn to the analysis of masculinity marks the inaugural moment of queer theory, with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's landmark study, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985).

to imply that questions about women have become uninteresting, or are so familiar that they no longer need to be asked. Moreover, when it focuses on the burdens of gender and the fragility of bonds among men, this scholarship tends to ignore the persistent links between masculinity, patriarchal power and privilege.

Those who are uncomfortable with this turn of events will applaud Judith Halberstam's refreshing *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1998), a work inaugurated by the bold dismissal of the beleaguered white male. "This study professes a degree of indifference to the whiteness of the male and the masculinity of the white male and the project of naming his power," Halberstam writes early on, "male masculinity figures in my project as a hermeneutic, and as a counterexample to the kinds of masculinity that seem most informative about gender relations and most generative of social change" (3). Rather than assuming that white masculinity is foundational, Halberstam treats it as the least interesting and promising of many variants of the masculine. And, while she acknowledges that masculinity can indeed be a burden, her satisfying rejoinder to the likes of Bordo and Faludi—who too frequently become apologists for the men who bear its weight—is that "it is hard to be very concerned about the burden of masculinity on males, however, if only because it so often expresses itself through the desire to destroy others, often women. Indeed, this dual mechanism of a lack of care for the self and a callous disregard for the care of others seems to characterize much of what we take for granted about white male masculinity" (274). One of the valuable lessons of Halberstam's work is that granting white men ownership of masculinity has elided more progressive, alternative versions of the masculine, and enabled the condemnation of female masculinity by both straight and lesbian feminists. *Female Masculinity* is not a perfect book. It is at times overly schematic, and there are moments when interpretation is maddeningly truncated. But this unevenness bespeaks the challenge of breaking

new ground. Halberstam challenges us to look at familiar texts and problems in fresh ways, and leaves room for future scholarship to expand its critical insights.

Female Masculinity makes the important and timely proposition that it is possible to study masculinity without men. In fact, masculinity is most complicated and transgressive when it is not tied to male body, especially to the straight, white male body. Halberstam argues that female masculinity is not merely a perverse supplement to dominant configurations of gender, but masculinity itself cannot be fully understood unless female masculinity is taken into account. Female masculinity has played a crucial but unrecognized role in the emergence of contemporary formations of the masculine. Empowering models of female masculinity have been neglected or misunderstood because of a cultural intolerance towards the gender ambiguity that the masculine woman represents. We live in a culture that, for several hundred years, has been unable to acknowledge gender indeterminacy as a functional mode of identification, instead explaining figures like the stone butch, the tomboy, and the androgyne in terms of pathology and deviance.

Female Masculinity is a project with explicit critical and personal goals. In addition to decoupling masculinity from men, Halberstam proposes to remedy the denigration of the masculine woman by mainstream feminists and woman-identified lesbians alike, who view her as a traitor for capitulating to butch stereotypes and engaging in a masochistic rejection of her own femininity.⁴ Not all versions of female masculinity give rise to such unease: Linda Hamilton's muscular aggression in *The Terminator II*, and the tough, bald-headed characters played by Demi Moore in *G.I. Jane* and Sigourney Weaver in *Aliens* and *Alien III* are examples

⁴ Halberstam cites Sheila Jeffreys, "Butch and Femme: Now and Then," in *Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History, 1840-1985*, ed. Lesbian History Group (London: Women's Press, 1989) 158-187; and Julia Penelope, "Whose Past Are We Reclaiming?" *Common Lives, Lesbian Lives* 9 (Fall 1983) as examples of this position. In both *The Male Body* and *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993) Bordo offers a feminist critique of female hardness, which she sees as a capitulation to dominant standards of male masculinity. The valorization of hardness for men and women alike contributes, Bordo argues, to the denigration of the more conventionally soft female body.

of a sexy and confident female masculinity within mainstream Hollywood film. Popular culture applauds such figures of gender transgression as long as they are resolutely heterosexual. But female masculinity becomes intolerable when it is linked to the intimation of non-normative sexuality. The hard, heterosexual female body is relatively uninteresting to Halberstam, who focuses on female bodies engaged in diverse types of masculine performance that are connected to various forms of same-sex desire.

The historical recuperation of a queer female masculinity requires new methods, for scholars have persistently misread diverse representations of the masculine woman by lumping them together under the category of lesbianism. The corrective Halberstam proposes is a methodology of “perverse presentism.” Too often, lesbian historiography has looked to the past with an eye to finding evidence familiar to and resonant with contemporary paradigms. Such presentist approaches, “seek only to find what they think they already know” (54), that is, instances of proto-lesbianism that reinforce the critic’s own beliefs and values. Drawing examples from the early nineteenth through the first decades of the twentieth century, Halberstam demonstrates the unacknowledged contribution of female masculinity to modern understandings of masculinity. Moreover, she shows how previous scholarship, eager to secure the historical foundations of lesbianism, has oversimplified, misunderstood, or elided a wide range of gender deviant behaviors. Not only do such approaches misconstrue the past, but they have consequences in the present, in that they contribute to a tendency among lesbians and feminists to reject female masculinity as self-hating and politically retrograde.

One of the most interesting examples of “perverse presentism” is Halberstam’s reinterpretation of the life of that paradigmatically queer author, Radclyffe Hall. Hall lived in a context where sexological theories of inversion provided the dominant understanding of same-

sex desire. As contemporary critics have observed, these theories reduce the complexity of human eroticism to a model in which heterosexuality is the norm, and deviations can only be described in terms of inversion. In criticizing the work of sexologists, scholars have tended to read all diagnoses of inversion as lesbianism misunderstood. But, according to Halberstam, such important correctives have ignored the wide variability “within communities of women who are attracted to women” (77), compressing a range of non-normative genders and sexualities within the category of lesbian. When “lesbian feminists...came to reject inversion as a theory of same-sex sexuality, they also rejected female masculinity as the overriding category of lesbian identification, putting in her place the woman-identified woman” (82). She concludes that, viewed through the lens of perverse presentism, the invert should not be automatically conflated with the lesbian. In many cases, inversion describes a quite different situation in which women who felt at odds with their bodies “effectively changed sex by masquerading as men” (87) in an era before the sex change was a medical possibility. Halberstam’s point is that a more historically nuanced understanding of female masculinity can make visible a multiplicity of identifications and practices that have been indiscriminately grouped together under the category of lesbianism.⁵

Halberstam’s reinterpretation of *The Well of Loneliness* demonstrates the exciting possibilities of perverse presentism. While the predominant critical tendency has been to

⁵ Jay Prosser has made a similar argument about Hall, in which he claims that reading inversion in terms of homosexuality erases the fact that the sexologists were attempting to think about transsexuality before medicalization made the sex-change operation a possibility. Prosser, whose book on transsexuality was also published in 1998, is a fascinating counterpart to Halberstam, for together, their work constitutes the outer frontier of sex and gender studies. Whereas Halberstam’s goal is to affirm the ambiguous figure of the masculine woman, Prosser argues that queer theory’s reverence for gender ambiguity threatens to reduce the transsexual to a trope. His project reasserts the materiality of the transsexual body: “If, for queer theory, transition is to be explored in terms of its deconstructive effects on the body and identity (transition as a symptom of the constructedness of the sex/gender system and a figure for the impossibility of this system’s achievement of identity), I read transsexual narratives to consider how transition may be the very route to identity and bodily integrity. In transsexual accounts transition does not shift the subject away from the embodiment of sexual difference but more fully into it.” Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998) 6.

denigrate the novel's protagonist, Stephen Gordon, as a melancholic and self-hating lesbian, Halberstam suggests that Gordon might be more accurately understood in terms of "what we would now call transsexual aspiration or transgendered subjectivity" (96).⁶ Concentrating on the role of clothing in Stephen's experience of gender inversion, Halberstam argues cleverly that whereas a novel like *The Picture of Dorian Gray* might effectively be read in terms of an epistemology of the closet, *The Well of Loneliness* must be understood not through the closet, but the wardrobe. Gordon's experience of inversion is crucially bound up with "a dressing that is not exactly cross-dressing and that positions itself against an aesthetic of nakedness" (99). Halberstam suggests that in the past, clothing and body had a more continuous relationship to one another in the fashioning of sexual subjectivity: "Stephen's repudiation of nakedness or the biological body as the ground for sexual identity suggests a modern notion of sexual identity as not organically emanating from the flesh but as a complex act of self-creation in which the dressed body, not the undressed body, represents one's desire" (106). Such an understanding could be productively applied to other representations of sexuality in the past, when the naked body might not have been the primary and definitive signifier that it is within contemporary paradigms that conflate genitalia with sexual identity.

The payoff for such historical analysis is that it shifts away from a contemporary fixation on identities to focus on sexual practices. In their current configurations, the identitarian categories "lesbian" and "gay" are quite inadequate to describe the broad array of erotic activity that cannot be described as "heterosexual." Halberstam acknowledges the importance of identity-based categories to political mobilization, while recognizing that politics and sexual

⁶ Esther Newton's reading of Gordon as "the mythic mannish lesbian," is the paradigmatic text for this analytical approach. "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian," *Signs* 9.4 (Summer 1984): 557-575. Again, Prosser makes exactly the same argument about Stephen Gordon, but arrives at strikingly different conclusions. Proposing, like Halberstam,

practices or erotic impulses are rarely aligned. And why should they be? She is critical of some lesbian feminists' attempts to police representations of same-sex activity in the misguided belief that such interventions will encourage appropriate forms of erotic activity. As an example, Halberstam cites lesbian erotica of the 1980s, in which the valorization of sameness and equality are played out in the description of sexual practices.⁷ Placing too much emphasis on identitarian categories like "lesbian" has elided more explicit consideration of sex as such: "we almost seem to assume that particular practices attend particular sexual identities even as we object to the naturalization of the homosexual-heterosexual binary" (114). Producing a pointed discussion about sex is serious business for Halberstam, for "it means becoming serious about a discourse of acts rather than identities" (116). And she makes a compelling case for the potential rewards of such a changed perspective: "Finding out what people do sexually and furthermore, what kinds of erotic narratives they apply to what they do sexually can rewrite both psychoanalytic theories of desire and scientific theories of sexuality. It can also clear up homogenizing notions of gay and lesbian desire that hold that all lesbians are attracted to other lesbians and all gay men to other gay men" (117).

Halberstam's call for renewed attention to sexual practices is not simply a theoretical exercise: *Female Masculinity* is a compelling read precisely because it is framed as a personal, as well as a critical and political, project. The appearance of Halberstam's more autobiographical voice in both introduction and conclusion highlights the importance of this undertaking. It is no accident that Halberstam's acknowledgement of her own female

that Gordon might productively be understood as a pre-medicalized transsexual, Prosser claims that Gordon decisively identifies with heterosexual men and the male body, while disavowing her identification with women.

⁷ Of course, Halberstam herself might be guilty of the same charge of policing erotic representation when she writes that a story from the lesbian anthology, *Common Lives, Lesbian Lives* (1983) is "asexual...because it de-eroticizes sex and assumes a sameness in desires" (137). Such an opinion seems to clash with her larger point about the difficulty of predicting what will turn us on and the inappropriateness of condemning another's representation of desire.

masculinity is articulated in the direct, confessional terms of a coming out narrative: “I was a masculine girl,” she writes, “and I am a masculine woman. For much of my life, my masculinity as been rendered shameful by public responses to my gender ambiguity. However, in the last ten years, I have been able to turn stigma into strength. This book is the result of a lengthy process of both self-examination and discussion with others” (xii). Her goal is both “to make my own female masculinity plausible, credible, and real” (19) and to begin a “discussion on masculinity for women in such a way that masculine girls and women do not have to wear their masculinity as a stigma but can infuse it with a sense of pride and indeed power” (xi). Writing, at such moments, more as an activist than a scholar, this voice is a refreshing complement to Halberstam’s contention that as queer theory has been incorporated into the academy it has broken contact with its origins in grass-roots political activism.

Halberstam reanimates the personal voice to describe her ethnographic research among drag kings. Frequenting clubs and becoming acquainted with performers enabled her to understand this subculture from her dual vantage point as a scholar and an enthusiastic participant. The chapter on drag kings, called “Masculinity and Performance,” includes a portrait of the author by photographer Del Grace. Unlike the subjects of other Grace photographs in this chapter, Halberstam’s gaze is not trained outward to confront the viewer, but appears oriented towards a mirror located somewhere just beyond the frame, where she admiringly contemplates her own image as she adjusts her tie. Instead of asking for external affirmation, Halberstam’s body language—her uplifted chin, confident posture, and compressed, somewhat enigmatic smile—projects the pride she claims in the introduction. The photograph’s caption, which describes her as “Judith ‘Jack’ Halberstam,” bespeaks the masculine role its subject is performing, as well as her simultaneous proximity to and distance from the authorial

Judith Halberstam. The juxtaposition of Judith and Jack is an excellent example of Halberstam's argument for the possibility of a conjunction between female and masculinity that is neither melancholic nor pathological. "Jack," a drag identity clearly more transitory and provisional than Judith Halberstam, is a citation that illustrates the author's simultaneous involvement in, and critical analysis of, drag king culture. As she notes in the chapter, there is a discrepancy between her own commitment to masculinity, and her perception by others within the context of the club scene: "I always attend the club in what is received as 'drag' (suit and tie, for example), even though I do not wear male clothing as drag" (244). The effect of describing these disparate modes of reception is to reiterate, again, the multiple forms, purposes, and effects of female masculinity. This image is also distinguished by its self-consciously artifactual quality. While other Del Grace photographs are characterized by a snapshot-style realism, the portrait of Halberstam is obviously posed and bears the visible imprint of the photographer's intervention. Halberstam is highlighted by an unnatural, ethereal light, that brings the dark folds of her suit, her eyes, and portions of her hair into negative relief, a pale luminous glow taking the place of shadows. A black outline around some parts of her form makes it appear cut out and pasted against the dark background. These devices call attention to the portrait as a representation, an artifact that captures the subject's image but also bears traces of the artist's contribution to the creative process.

What makes Halberstam's portrait memorable is its bold categorical indeterminacy. In addition to the obvious refusal of gender polarities, it walks a fuzzy line between impressionism and photographic realism; its subject is at once ethnographer and informant, author and text, engaged in transitory drag performance and a more enduring embodiment of female masculinity. But the deliberate refusal to categorize that makes this photograph provocative runs counter to

the organizational logic that structures much of *Female Masculinity*, particularly the last two chapters, which provide a catalogue of masculine types within film and drag subculture. “Specificity is all” (173), Halberstam insists, highlighting the importance of naming, describing, and organizing taxonomies of female masculinity. This pronouncement is part of a larger argument that overarching categories like “homosexual,” “lesbian,” and even “queer” have failed to account for the diverse and protean arrangements of gender and sexuality, a failure that has contributed to the denigration and erasure of female masculinity. But, to put it reductively, Halberstam’s solution to the exclusions and omissions of categorical thinking is to come up with more categories. Borrowing Eve Sedgwick’s notion of “nonce taxonomies,” Halberstam’s goal is to make visible “categories that we use daily to make sense of our worlds but that work so well that we actually fail to recognize them” (8). Sedgwick’s point, as I take it, is that nonce taxonomies, deployed in “the making and unmaking and *remaking* and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world,” are not easily systematized in the way that Halberstam’s organizational logic suggests.⁸ In particular, the last two chapters of *Female Masculinity* suffer from an excessively schematic taxonomy, in contrast to the more complex approach she adopts to analyze sexual practices in the historical past. The tension that troubles Halberstam’s work, between a capaciously flexible model of sexuality and one that is fractured endlessly in an attempt to account for every possible variant of experience, is characteristic of gay and lesbian identity politics (and perhaps all identity politics) in general. A broadly inclusive banner like queer is, for some, so expansive that it has become meaningless, whereas the movement towards ever greater categorical specificity threatens to make coalition an impossibility.

⁸ Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1990) 23.

It seems that Halberstam wants to have it both ways, to criticize existent categories for not doing justice to the diversity of sexual experience and identification, but to produce ever more exacting taxonomies as a corrective. The pitfalls of an excessively categorical logic are illustrated when Halberstam concludes her insightful reading of Radclyffe Hall by remarking that the persistent misunderstandings of her life might be resolved with “a more finely calibrated system of sexual identity” (93). But I’m not convinced that this is true, particularly in light of Halberstam’s overarching argument *against* the conflation of sexual practices and identities, which she sees as a predictable gesture that needs to be replaced by an understanding of sexuality as diverse and unsystematic. Surveying the rich evidence provided within the pages of *Female Masculinity*, it seems more accurate to conclude that the odd alignments of sex and gender are most powerful when they refuse the logic of categorization altogether.

The drive to categorize leads Halberstam, at times, to unsteady speculation. For example, she writes of the nineteenth century, “I am certain that other court cases from the same period and other letters and diaries, *if discovered*, would provide a rich record of cross-identifying women in the nineteenth century; indeed, each category of cross-identification, from passing women to cross-dressing sailors and soldiers, deserves its own particular consideration” (52, my italics). Here, Halberstam must be found guilty of precisely the inaccuracy with which she brands other lesbian historiographers. Wishing to find evidence of what she believes would be there to strengthen her case for the viability of an empowered female masculinity in the present, Halberstam speculates on as-yet undiscovered private papers. I understand the motivation behind this fantasy of documents that would give voice to previously silent sexual minorities from the past, but it is difficult to defend such leaps of faith in the context of an argument against historical imprecision.

Despite my quarrel with Halberstam's at times excessively categorical thinking, her historical readings are compelling, and her criticism of existing lesbian scholarship is trenchant and incisive. This is less true of her chapter on film, called "Looking Butch," which could go further to tease out the dynamics of spectatorship that it promises to unfold in its opening paragraphs. "Looking Butch" is a fitting title for Halberstam's approach to film, which she describes as "the reconsideration of what it means to 'look' butch, to look at butches, and even to engage in a 'butch' gaze" (175). The chapter begins by describing the relationship between stereotypical images and the vagaries of spectatorship, which, in a certain sense is always already queer because the viewer will inevitably cross genders as she identifies with multiple characters and scenarios during the course of any given film narrative. However, the analysis of individual films is devoted primarily to questions of content, rather than more sustained discussion of spectatorship either as it is structured into the films themselves or in terms of actual audience reception. In keeping with the penchant for categories, the majority of the chapter is divided into subsections corresponding to the following categories of female masculinity: the tomboy, the predatory butch, the fantasy butch, the transvestite butch, barely butch, and postmodern butch.

Whereas other chapters concern representations produced in Britain and the U.S., "Looking Butch" mentions a Japanese and Brazilian film, in addition to its discussion of Euro-American cinema. "My aim here," Halberstam writes, "is not to gloss over the historical differences between each cinematic genre and its specific history but to show that butch images are used for a complex range of purposes within the history of cinema" (187). However, her analyses of Shushuke Kaneko's *Summer Vacation 1999* (1988) and the Brazilian film, *Vera* (1987), do gesture towards historical and national differences when she comments of *Vera*: "it is significant that this film is Brazilian and that it reinforces a different and highly gendered code of

sexual variance” (216). My point is not that Halberstam should stay within the boundaries of national cinemas, particularly in the context of a contemporary global market for the distribution and screening of films, which are inevitably viewed by diverse audiences far from the original context in which they were produced. Rather, the selections seem somewhat haphazard, and the rapid movement from one example to another (she compares *Vera* to the 1953 American musical, *Calamity Jane*) threatens at times to reduce the analysis to a comparative character study. Because Halberstam was much more careful in locating her literary readings *within* a national and historical framework, her discussion of film is disappointing and less useful to a reader with more than a passing interest in cinema.

Too often, her observations simply trail off, leaving the impression that there is much more to say. For instance, she describes the grisly death of Vasquez, the butch Latina in *Aliens*: “neither pull-ups nor a moment of butch bonding with a male marine can pull her from the jaws of death, and this butch meets a gory and untimely end” (205). Surely, the representation (and gruesome elimination) of a butch within a film so literally oozing with anxiety about female sexuality needs more extensive interpretation. Repeatedly in this chapter I am left with the impression that further analysis is being withheld, that a reading is truncated precisely at the moment when a provocative hypothesis is advanced.

Halberstam’s reading of Vasquez raises another set of questions about her general treatment of racial and ethnic identity. *Female Masculinity* is a book about gender and sexuality that is sensitive to the way issues of race and class matter, but the analysis of the latter terms is unfortunately underdeveloped. The impression conveyed by the book as a whole is that while gender and sexuality are mutable, fluctuating facets of identity, race and class remain fairly static. Halberstam writes of the racial dimensions of Vasquez’s character, “the particular valence

of Latina masculinity is underscored by the fact that a Jewish actress, Jeanette Goldstein, is used to play this role. Although Goldstein makes a convincing Latina, it is worth asking why the butch could not have been Jewish or white in this film or why a Latina could not have been cast in the role” (181). Granted, there is a lengthy tradition within Hollywood film of casting white actors to play non-white characters. But what is the precise motivation for this question, and what kind of answer does the author anticipate? This is yet another instance in which the analysis stops short, leaving me frustrated at its refusal to carry through the provocations it sparks. To speculate, the questions Halberstam wants to ask seem to assume that an actor’s ethnic identity *should* correspond to the roles that she plays. This is an understandable impulse in the context of an industry that has historically excluded people of color from significant roles. But it is an odd assumption in a book that is all about the productive tension caused by a discontinuity between sex and gender. If female masculinity has the potential to create the most powerful and transgressive versions of masculinity, could the same be true of racial crossing? A work like Eric Lott’s *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* demonstrates that the contours of whiteness are brought into striking relief precisely as it crosses with the parodic performance of blackness.⁹ Moreover, linking Jewish and white in opposition to Latina, Halberstam neglects more subtle differences between Jewish and white. Indeed, while often Jewish and white are functionally interchangeable, one of the ways that Jewish women have traditionally been coded as non-white is through stereotypes that associate them with masculine aggression and financial acquisitiveness. In short, in her approach to questions of racial and ethnic difference, sometimes Halberstam seems to go for easy answers rather than the careful analysis she applies to questions of gender, sexuality, and eroticism. Likewise, she tends

⁹ *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995).

to gloss over the misogyny and homophobia of some non-white communities in her search for representations of female masculinity that are empowering, positive, and queer. This leads to certain contradictions: in contrast to her apparent desire for authenticity in the reading of Vasquez, Halberstam excuses potentially homophobic remarks made by Queen Latifah of her role in *Set It Off* (“I’m not a dyke...That’s what Cleo is,” 228), by emphasizing the difference between filmic representations and the actress’s own sexual identity.¹⁰

Yet let me be clear that the shortcomings of this book are overshadowed by the fact that Halberstam has successfully accomplished her goal of bringing affirmative visibility to forms of sexual and gendered being that have been neglected or criticized by feminists, gay and lesbian communities alike. Many of the aspects of this study that I have described critically may be attributed to the difficulty of mapping unmarked territory. Halberstam takes on a vast project, and is clearly committed to sketching out the contours of many possible approaches to female masculinity, rather than dwelling on one or two in extensive detail. The chapter on film alone suggests the possibilities for numerous future research projects, and its at times superficial treatment of individual films in fact makes it extremely useful as a preliminary catalogue of cinematic representations of female masculinity that may have much the same function as Vito Russo’s classic, *The Celluloid Closet*, treasured for its extensive survey of gay, lesbian, and bisexual representations in Hollywood film.¹¹ My assessment of the importance of Halberstam’s contribution is not mere speculation. Teaching a lecture course on masculinity in the Fall of 1999, I enthusiastically referred students eager to research the topic of female masculinity to Halberstam’s book. Not only did I feel confident that these students, coming to their research

¹⁰ For a sensitive reading of homophobia among African Americans, see Philip Brian Harper, “Eloquence and Epitaph: Black Nationalism and the Homophobic Impulse in Responses to the Death of Max Robinson,” *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African American Identity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) 3-38.

with a range of interpretive abilities and personal motivations, would find Halberstam's work both accessible and enlightening, but I believed that each would encounter there something of great intellectual and personal value.

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¹¹ Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).