INTERVIEW WITH JACK HALBERSTAM

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Interview by Chantelle Gray Van Heerden for *Gender Questions*
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JACK HALBERSTAM is Professor of English, Comparative Literature and Gender Studies at Columbia University in New York City. Halberstam is the author of five books including: *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). They have written articles that have appeared in numerous journals, magazines and collections. Halberstam is currently working on several projects, including a book titled *Wild Things: Queerness After Nature*. Here they are interviewed by Chantelle Gray van Heerden for *Gender Questions* on transgenderism, anarchism and other aspects of identity and queerness.

CHANTELLE GRAY VAN HEERDEN: Over the past few years there has been a noticeable increase of transgender people in movies and television series. We may think here, for example, of the movie *The Danish Girl*, the Amazon series *Transparent*, Jamie Clayton in the *Sense8* and Laverne Cox from *Orange is the New Black*. One of the most pertinent issues here is the representation of transgender people who are often, though not exclusively (as the list above suggests), played—and therefore portrayed—by cisgender people. Do you think this kind of representation is problematic? I am also wondering if you think that this kind of transgender mainstreaming glosses over the very personal and deeply affecting emotions experienced by transgender people before, during and after coming out and/or transitioning.[1]

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1   Transitioning can range from changing clothing, appearance and pronouns to beginning hormone treatment or opting for medical procedures. Importantly, none of these options are considered more valid than any other, and no single one renders a person more trans* than any of the other options.

JACK HALBERSTAM: I do think that trans* actors should be cast in trans* roles where possible. But, I also think that trans* actors should be cast in cisgender roles where appropriate and so I am uncomfortable with an essentialist approach to this question that mandates only a trans* actor for a trans* role. More interesting, in the case of some of these representations, would be to ask about which stories we choose to tell about trans* people and which we ignore. Mainstreaming trans* imagery can be disturbing, not simply because it implies appropriation, but because of the way that the complexities of trans* life are ironed out within the mainstream demand for recognisable life stories.

CG: The body continues to be a locale for processes of normalisation, domestication, homogenisation and pathologising. As a result of this, in combination with the workings of the well-oiled capitalist machine, gender variance and sexual relations are necessarily recuperated. In line with this, you recount the narrative of the film *The Kids are Alright* in your book, *Gaga Feminism*, to show what happens when "the actual scripting of human sexual relations" remains entirely "untouched."[2] Anarchists have very good critiques of the nuclear family model and the way it functions to replicate the state. How have your anarchist views informed your own gender identity and family life?

JH: As far as anarchism goes, I don't see it as a tidy set of positions or as a range of political responses among which we can pick and choose. Rather, unlike socialist investments in the family and marriage, anarchist thinkers, like Emma Goldman, have offered a critique of domestic heteronormativity based upon the orientation of marriage and family life to ownership and possession.

CG: I like your notion of the "queer art of failure." In your book by the same name, you propose that we find alternatives to the normative grids and structures informing (and controlling) our lives. On your website you also link this to capitalism, which relies on "winners and losers." I have, however, heard someone at a local conference arguing that failure is not such an easy position to take (or even an option) in African contexts. So there is a tension here. But I think your view is aimed at showing *why* this might be the case (that is, because capitalism relies on winners and losers and Africa has been exploited for that reason) and so you are queering the notion of failure. Am I right in saying this?

JH: Failure is not a position; it is not identified with a people or an identity; it is not a project to which folks should commit; it does not require membership nor ask for allegiance. Rather, failure, like death, is an inevitable part of every life and every existence. My critique is of the logic of success/failure which maps out life trajectories according to very familiar binaries opposing hetero-homo, cis- to trans-, whiteness to

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2   Halberstam, J. 2012. *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*. Boston: Beacon Press, pp. 45–46.

people of colour and so on. I argue for turning to failure and loss and the anti-heroic for a different kind of political project than those produced by nationalisms, mainstream activisms and so on.

CG: Something that is becoming increasingly prevalent and acceptable/accepted is the "appification" of identity, which is often promoted as linked to "health." But this overuse of apps seems to me to be another controlling mechanism. So there is a quantification of the self and of identity; a capitalist focus on hyperperformance (which shows again the need, I would say, for the queer art of failure). How do you think this appification ties in with issues such as state power and the organisation of gender identity (if you do)?

JH: This is a great way of thinking about reorientations of contemporary life in the realms of health, professionalism and performance—appification! That said, I do not necessarily think that we need that term to understand the current biopolitical mode of control in which large, complex populations are managed through increasingly stratified notions of selfhood, health, legality and normativity.

CG: Identity politics, or at least the neoliberal form of it (which you have written about in many different ways, but I'm thinking here in particular of the post, "You are Triggering Me!"), has also taken root in South Africa.[3] Here, perhaps even more than in the U.S., it is informed by the intersection between gender, race and class. The trauma behind this idea of "triggering" is, as you also say, very real, yet this form of identity policing has had very negative consequences, both for people supposedly causing the triggers and those being triggered. In a similar sense, I think this is true for the "calling out" culture. You specifically speak of this in terms of censorship in your post. Do you have specific ideas about ways in which we can address these traumas (is this even the right word?) more meaningfully?

JH: I think "identity politics" has a tangled past and a confusing history. As public intellectuals such as Masha Gessen have reminded us, identity politics is not simply a narrow adherence to topics that are geared towards self-interest but has also emerged out of the marginalised positions of those for whom conventional politics are useless. My critique of trigger warnings had as much to do with debates about the power of representation as it did about claims based on identity. I still think we are way too simplistic in our readings of cultural texts and I think that trauma-based claims about not being able to watch this or that set of images are manipulative and misleading. That said, when you need to change the orientation of mainstream representation—calling for the removal of statues of racist and colonialist figures from public space for example—

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3   Halberstam, J. 2014. *You are Triggering Me! The Neo-Liberal Rhetoric of Harm, Danger and Trauma.* (Accessed 15 July 2017) https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/07/05/you-are-triggering-me-the-neo-liberal-rhetoric-of-harm-danger-and-trauma/.

extreme measures can be justified. But there is a difference between pulling down a statue of Cecil Rhodes and calling for the censorship of even queer texts, within which we might witness acts of brutality against queer bodies. We cannot cleanse history of past wrongs and it would be wrong to try to do so, but we can call for new orientations in the present to those histories. This call would require confrontation with texts and monuments, even if the confrontation leads to their removal, it would not require trigger warnings.

CG: Decoloniality is a hot topic in South Africa and we have seen numerous conferences, papers, debates and firm instructions to change curricula. But what do *you* think it means to decolonise gender? What does it mean as a politics?

JH: I think the decolonising of gender and sexuality is an important project. Like other such intellectual projects it means thinking about gender and sexuality historically and within the context of colonial inscriptions. In my new book *Trans*: A Queer and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, I think about the act of naming within a colonial context and ask how we might disrupt the colonial impulse to classify. I do not seek to abandon categories so much as think about their provenance, their histories and their potential futures.

CG: Trans- can be a productive prefix, meaning "across", "beyond", "through" or "on the other side." It also connotes a "crossing"—a juncture. In terms of transgender subjectivities, no doubt all of these connotations are applicable. But there is a sense of trans- to identity in general—as in that which is *trans*versal, the cutting through and meeting of—that has not been resolved in LGBTIQ communities, let alone society at large. And it is this crisscrossing between that which is known and sanctioned (the normative) and that which is unknown (non-conforming, often termed "deviant") that results in a negative use of the prefix, namely *trans*phobia. This, for me, becomes a question of ethics, of ethical behaviour, of ethical practices. But while we are seeing gender redefined on many platforms, ranging from jurisprudence to social media, trans* and gender-nonconforming people remain targets of violence. What are the central ethical questions for you in terms of bridging these continuing divides? Does it not perhaps entail re-envisioning entirely what we mean by "human" and who is included in this privileged, restricted space?

JH: The trans* people who are most at risk for transphobic violence are poor and of colour. This is important not because we want to separate out the fates of trans* people of colour from others, but because the more generalised claim of violence directed at trans* people may not be accurate. Plenty of trans* people who are white and middle class do not find themselves the targets of transphobia. So, while I want to make that distinction in terms of our ongoing discussions of transphobic violence, I always think we should be trying to break up the concept of the human!

CG: Is there something like post-identity, a *beyond* gender? Is this something to enact or strive for, considering that there are still so many who are not even allowed to "enter into" a more visible identity? I am thinking here not only of the queer, the subversive, the nonconforming, the alternative—for whom there is often, if not always, a deep sense of agency—but of immigrants, the homeless, the nameless "problems" of our societies.

JH: Very little in the realm of human experience has been permitted to stand outside of or beyond representation. We propose that representation is inadequate to or damaging to certain experiences, but we cannot claim that immigrants and the homeless have not been permitted to "enter into identity." Rather, one would want to argue about the exclusionary logics of concepts like citizenship which admit some and deny others. Often, identity frameworks are techniques of governance, not routes to lucrative forms of recognition. I am not in favour of arguing for a mode of being that is "beyond gender" or "post-identity"—we cannot wish categories away and, in fact, those categories that we might want to wish away hold within them important histories of inclusion and exclusion.

CG: What is next for you?
JH: I am currently finishing a book titled *Wild Things: Queer Theory after Nature*. In this book, I offer a reconsideration of the meaning of sexuality, sociality and art after the end of nature. By the "end of nature," I mean both the end of wild environments untouched by human presence and the end of the discourse on the natural that places humans, animals and vegetation within a hierarchical order of things. My earlier scholarship offered histories of gender-variant figures like the masculine woman or the transgender man in relation to discourses of monstrosity, the natural and the science of gender. In this book, I turn to the question of nature itself and ask about new forms of embodiment and identity in an era of environmental decline. As a growing sense of ecological ruin reorients many of our basic assumptions about living, dying and futurity, how have we recalibrated our understandings of the body, flesh and futurity?

CG: On that note, I would like to thank you for your time and for sharing your insights with *Gender Questions*.