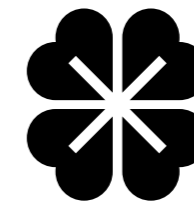




Jack Halberstam

Facing Queer Frontiers



INTERVIEW
Charles Shafaieh

PHOTOGRAPHY
Del LaGrace Volcano

If queer theory can feel overwhelming, Jack Halberstam is here to help. The renowned queer theorist discusses the plasticity of identity, desire in the digital world and what is needed in today's fight for LGBT rights.

In the wake of the Supreme Court overturning *Roe v. Wade*, many Americans are searching for fast legal solutions that will prevent further oppression. According to queer theorist Jack Halberstam, however, passing laws alone is an insufficient response to a systemic catastrophe. It demands solidarity and collective action among groups such as women, LGBT people and sex workers.

A professor of gender studies and English at Columbia University, Halberstam has, throughout their illustrious career, delivered unvarnished opinions that problematize popular notions of progress. Through their unique fusion of theory and pop culture in books including *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), *Trans** (2018) and, most recently, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020), they compel a reconsideration of gendered embodiment and urge us to wrest queer politics from heteronormative, capitalist structures. Only then might its radical potential be realized.

CHARLES SHAFAlEH How do you feel about pronouns nowadays? Are they an indicator of renegotiated social norms? Is refusing to acknowledge preferred pronouns homophobic or transphobic?

JACK HALBERSTAM There's a mistaken

idea that if people get your pronouns right – as if there is a right – then somehow recognition is complete. Recognition is a complex process that cannot boil down to a pronoun, especially one that may shift over a lifetime. Nowadays, appearance and identification aren't necessarily synched. Therefore the chances of someone getting your pronoun right without you telling them is really low. It's great that we ask people their pronouns, but it's not great that we suggest we must enforce them as if they're written in stone.

A stranger getting your pronoun wrong is not an offensive speech act. It's more a habitual reading of the body according to the protocols the culture has made available. To mistake that as an outrageous act of homophobia or transphobia is to misunderstand how those phobias work and what the remedy is. If you think they work by being misgendered, the solution is correct gendering. Whereas if you think they work as a system of social conditioning, then the solution is changing the way we inculcate people into a gender system.

CS An aspect of that solution involves understanding that all subject positions are relational – that, for example, “I” only exists in relation to “you.” Why must we remind people that subject declarations are not individualistic?

JH There's been an individualistic narrative about trans*. [The asterisk Halberstam employs when using trans* derives from Internet search coding. When used, the resulting search contains all entries which include its prefix, i.e., “trans*” encompasses all “trans” words, from translate to transpose. Its heightened attention to inclusivity opens space for nonbinary, two-spirit, gender-fluid and other people whose identities destabilize the gender binary.] In particular, that only you can identify your gender, that it's about you and your relationship to your body. That's a fantasy because we're always in relation. Even if we're alone, isolated or unparented, we're still in a relationship with a big Other, if not a small and specific Other. Identity is produced through multiple processes, many of which are reflected back to you through another.

CS These declarations often occur strongly online, where individualistic behavior is already heightened. Yet so much of queer history concerns bodies together in space. What results from the severe shift from the material to the digital, in which we lose haptic aspects of queer intimacy and desire? For example, we're speaking near Chelsea Piers in New York, a significant cruising site in the 1970s.

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JH Gay male cruising is a great example of the costs of switching from the material to the digital. As an activity, cruising was anti-capitalist because it has a wholly different temporality than, say, shopping or even hustling. Maybe somebody slipped someone money in the course of these encounters, but that wasn’t necessarily the encounter’s purpose. The purpose was sex. Since sex is such a massive part of consumer desire, from a capitalist perspective the question became, “How do we transform this activity into capitalism?” Grindr figured that out. It transformed a material practice that depends on bodies arranged in space, in ways that they may connect or may miss each other, into an algorithm and a sure thing. That so much money accrued in that transformation should give us pause about how queer desires get uploaded into a profit matrix rather than simply harnessed for transgressive goals.

CS Chelsea Piers has since become a site for nostalgia for pre-AIDS sexual promiscuity. Why should we be careful with that type of nostalgia, though?

JH Via Grindr, we know that promiscuity isn’t a reliable source of political radicalism. In academia, we regularly study Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* and agree when he writes that “saying yes to sex doesn’t mean saying no to power,” but a lot of scholarship continues to invest in the revolutionary potential of sex. Having lots of sex may mean you have a lot of time on your hands or that you’re able-bodied. It doesn’t mean you vote for radical political platforms.

The algorithm Grindr formulated valorizes ideal masculine bodies, so much so that gay men are once again “clones,” as they were called in the 1980s. The app shows the same torso, the same musculature, the same kind of promise of phallic fullness, and the captions offer limits on the kind of sex imagined: “no fats, no femmes, no Asians” is a kind of mantra for gay normativity. What were micro-insults by gay men in bathhouses sizing somebody up have become macro-features on these apps. That has a very different impact on an entire generation of gay men. The app weeds out markers of femininity and produces hyper-masculine markers of attractiveness. This ends up selecting for most likely white, muscled and young bodies. At that point, you’re basically part of a fascist regime of beauty and racial hygiene.

In *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, Samuel Delaney wrote about the idea that, in contemporary society, what he calls “networking” replaces what was once “contact” or face-to-face engagements. His point was that much of what happened in real time and space has now become part of a complex system of virtual, mediated connection and material and fleshly contact. Making sense of the desiring structures of these new systems is part of the work of queer theory.

CS You’ve written about how younger people often lack intergenerational contact with older LGBT people, from whom they could learn queer histories. Heteronormative parents are largely ignorant of these histories, and yet they are championed as progressives today for accepting

whatever declarations of identity their children make. What problems might this raise?

JH The number of kids who can say, “I don’t know what my gender is yet” – because their white, middle-class parents are at least sympathetic to whatever wobbly identity they may have – has expanded. This is great for kids who need room to explore their gender and sexual markers without being rushed or forced to make premature decisions. But while some well-meaning parents are just listening to their trans* kids, others have been trained to think good parenting is fixing everything. If the child says, “You think I’m a girl, but I’m really a boy,” the next step is to rush in with fixes for that. I believe that’s why a lot of young people use the term “nonbinary” – to keep normative gender at bay until they’re able to decide for themselves, or to keep their parents at bay so that they’re not rushed to make decisions. Nonbinary is therefore a complex contemporary marker. It does an enormous amount of work in terms of holding the desires of many different kinds of bodies, but we cannot yet see what the political work of the category might be.

CS It does still reinforce the gender binary, after all.

JH Yes. The fantasy of nonbinary is that you’re in a nonbinary space, but nonbinary is in a binary with binary. It’s a potentially contradictory term, but so what? It does very important work for many different kinds of people and bodies.

CS How does this indeterminacy create different politics from the queer politics of 30 or 40 years ago?

“What people want is broad-based, foundational, radical, transformative change – and that will not come in the form of laws or policies.”

JH I’m not sure I can answer that question yet. Nonbinary people have grafted their sense of identity onto an older edifice of queer politics, even though those politics emerged from confrontations between gay, lesbian and transgender people and the law rather than between nonbinary people and the law or medicine. Nonetheless, while there are certain historical conditions that favor nonbinary people – the ability to put “X” on your driver’s license, sympathetic parents, public discourses about nonbinary – this is still a difficult category to inhabit. Normativity abhors ambiguity, and ambiguity and irresolution are at the heart of contemporary nonbinary discourse.

CS What radical potentials are lost in that grafting, which views the past through the lens of the present rather than, say, learning from historical radical movements?

JH The critique that trans* and queer activists have levied against Euro-American culture concerns the relays of power that arc back and forth between the state and the family to try to guarantee the continuity of white supremacy and the dominance of heterosexual forms. The trajectory of queer activism in the 1970s oriented toward tearing down these structures and building something new, different and transformative. Nowadays, under the manipulations of neoliberalism, rebellion gets turned into something you say on social media or an impotent gesture that enhances someone’s brand but doesn’t necessarily impact how power circulates or who may be the beneficiaries of power. Because socialism

was the driver behind gay-liberation movements in the ’70s, there was a larger vision of what people were fighting for. Now, social change has been equated with access to gay marriage. But marriage is a deeply oppressive institution that needs to go, not to be extended.

You can change the lives of white gay and lesbian people by granting access to tax benefits and marriage rights, yet nothing else in the culture might change. Those recipients of these new benefits feel recognized and included, but nothing has actually changed in terms of the distribution of power, resources and opportunity. In contemporary abolition politics, the emphasis is not on accessing recognition for certain groups but on finding solidarity with the incarcerated, the unhoused and the unemployed on behalf of much larger forms of social change.

CS How can this position help push back against the Supreme Court overturning *Roe v. Wade*?

JH This was not simply an assault directed at one group. It’s part of a method of putting in place an activist right-wing government through democratic procedures. The real question is: how can we make deep changes to this particular political structure rather than just messing with who is on what committee? Rather than gearing up the Pride machine, we should find strong vectors for solidarity between groups in order to challenge and remove these governmental structures. We know the right wing is homophobic, transphobic and misogynist. But how can we mount a credible opposition that isn’t simply atomized bits of those hatreds but is instead a solid, united front?

CS We also can’t be consumed by the infighting that the right wing foments.

JH In her book *Feminist International* (2020), Verónica Gago argues for a general strike made up of domestic workers, stay-at-home mothers, trans* women, sex workers, gig-economy workers and so on. One reason the right wing is so effective is because they tend to mobilize fears and phobias on behalf of very conservative agendas that preserve the status quo. On the left, we do not tend to recognize a common enemy made up of class and race interests who would be an easy target if we could be united in our opposition. That we are not united is a liability moving forward.

CS This kind of change extends well beyond the codification of *Roe*.

JH The demand for something concrete leads to the changing of laws or the production of policies. But what people want is broad-based, foundational, radical, transformative change – and that will not come in the form of laws or policies. Transformation is an abolitionist project that seeks to change how people think about how we live, how housing is structured, how help is provided, how aid is distributed, how profits are shared. Those questions are bigger than what laws we need to make gays and lesbians feel included and safe. That’s how the state thinks. The problem, politically speaking, lies in agreeing that LGBT people should get their due recognition rather than thinking about the fact that this recognition will be predicated upon another kind of exclusion. 