

Undoing Gender

JUDITH BUTLER

Routledge, \$21.95 paper, ISBN 0-415-96923-9

In a Queer Time and Place

Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives

JUDITH HALBERSTAM

New York University, \$19.00 paper, ISBN 0-8147-3585-1

Philosophy is certainly getting weird these days. That would likely be the nonacademic individual's response to either of these books and their intense re-envisioning of contemporary social mores about gender and its continually shifting role in culture. Technically speaking, Judith Butler and Judith Halberstam, both highly respected writers of academe, would more likely consider themselves cultural theorists or critics than philosophers, especially Halberstam, whose cultural critiques respond largely to art, film, and popular culture, the role the critic has long assumed. And yet both of these texts have their roots in essential ideas about philosophy, in looking at the world—or in this case, one specific part of it—in nontraditional but deeply contemplative ways.

This is an important aspect of these two authors that nonacademic readers need to know. Traditionally, these types of books have found their homes in academe, and certainly scholars and professors of cultural studies will be the core audience of these texts. But in this review I'm just as concerned with the general reader who enjoins his/her own thoughts about the state and role of gender in our society today, and I hope to respond to these texts from both the academic and lay perspectives. Butler, whose books include *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies That Matter* and *Excitable Speech*, has long been accused of writing dense, at times incoherent prose that seemingly excludes the general audience. The book jacket of her study seems indicative of this when it notes that the essays collected here include "recent reflections on gender and sexuality, focusing on new kinship, psychoanalysis and the incest taboo, transgender, intersex, diagnostic categories, social violence and the tasks of social transformation." An academic reader might drool over such an auspicious list, while the general reader might respond with a none-too-happy "What the hell?" Already Butler's text seems to exclude those who do not have the PhD necessary to understand it.

While this criticism is often true of her other writing, it is not the case in *Undoing Gender*. Butler seems both more philosophical and more grounded in this text, such as when she muses:

What makes for a livable world is no idle question. It is not merely a question for philosophers. ... It becomes a question for ethics, I think, not only when we ask the personal question, what makes my own life bearable, but when we ask, from a position of power, and from the point of view of distributive justice, what makes, or ought to make, the lives of others bearable?

This question infuses the text, and Butler argues the point as it relates to gender and issues of transgenderism from a perspective drawn from real-world experiences, experiences as likely shared by a nonacademic audience as by an academic one. It relates to violence against transgendered people and "fag" bash-

ing in general, to issues surrounding gay marriage, to conditions for adoption, to access to reproductive technology, and to changes in kinship and familial structures. It relates to both scholarship and activism, and Butler draws on her experiences in both areas to springboard her arguments past the realm of academe and into more earthy and substantial arenas.

Though it is a collection of individually published essays, *Undoing Gender* is also a substantial reaction to *Gender Trouble* on some levels. For this reason, it helps any reader become familiar with the arguments of the latter text before tackling this new one. Some of what Butler writes here is a redaction of *Gender Trouble*, and some a continuation of it. And for most general readers (and even many who are in academe) the reading will be slow going. But the questions raised are important, thought provoking, and relevant. Unlike other texts, *Undoing Gender* seems more designed to raise intelligent, relevant, cutting-edge questions than to respond to them. The result is really a philosophical critique and debate on an issue that still cuts to the heart of how all of us are treated and considered by our own society.

If Judith Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* is more traditionally academic, this is only because it deals in more traditional academic realms by responding to avenues of popular culture ranging from the "drag king" subculture and the film *Boys Don't Cry* to Austin Powers and the boy-band phenomenon. It is also rooted, however, in more philosophical concepts, specifically in the notion of a "queer time" and a "queer space." As Halberstam writes in her opening chapter:

Queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. They also develop according to other logics of location, movement, and identification. ... Obviously not all gay, lesbian, and transgender people live their lives in radically different ways from their heterosexual counterparts, but part of what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the way it has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space.

In using "queerness" to describe temporal and spatial phenomena, Halberstam focuses on atypicality, that which our society deems abnormal or even perverse. Halberstam herself uses the drag king subculture as a case study of her theorizations. Even when she discusses other cultural avenues, she often returns to the drag king to cement her point.

Readers will note that Halberstam is constantly answering the important questions she raises, a tactic Butler once used frequently but has for her own reasons eschewed in her latest text. The result is less a philosophical debate and more a cultural critique, one that certainly has staunch academic value but which lacks crossover appeal.

Nonacademic audiences may also wonder why Halberstam focuses on the relatively minor drag king subculture when most audiences would be much more familiar with drag queens, who have certainly invaded larger territories of popular culture. Halberstam, though, prefers to focus on the more unusual man-

ifestations of the transgendered, and it reveals one of the strengths of the book, allowing her to examine the topic from a unique perspective. Her text is thus academically important, critiquing identity politics and examining uncommon but essential transgender representations in art, film, and society.

Ultimately, academic audiences are sure to gobble up and appreciate both books. But I also encourage nonacademic audiences to give Butler's text a try. If you wish to challenge yourself and your own preconceived notions of gender through an excellent and viable critique (dare I say, philosophical study?) that raises numerous important, interesting, and timely questions, *Undoing Gender* will certainly lead you there. ■

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