

Harri Kalha's response to Judith Halberstam

Harri Kalha

Socially speaking...

... I am thrilled that Judith (Jack) Halberstam has deemed my article worthy of commentary, and that SQS is eager to publish the whole shebang (or is it hebang?) under the pretense of “topical debate”. What most delights me is the rich tone of Halberstam’s response, its oscillation between the severely critical and the bitchily light and airy. While I do not think the two of us can (nor do we need to) really see eye to eye in all matters at hand, I sincerely hope our exchange will shed light on some of the tensions that exist within queer theorizing around the new millennium.

As for my original paper, some of our readers will remember that it was presented at a symposium in Berlin way back in the Spring of 2009. Soon after, I was in an accident, had to undergo two operations, and “enjoyed” a lengthy leave of absence from academia. The piece was buried and forgotten under a heap of unfinished business, from which SQS has now salvaged it. So it is with a sense of nostalgia, but also apprehension and ambivalence that I return to this once so heated topic.¹

¹ I would like to take this opportunity to thank my dear colleague Livia Hekanaho, without whose inspiration and support the ballsy Berlin paper would probably never have materialized. Reviewed recently even by *GLQ*, the article was rejected not once, but twice. The first time around because it had been presented as a conference paper, and then (after references to the conference were omitted) on grounds that it was “too embedded in its textual objects”. Thanks to SQS for taking this “embeddedness” to be a potential virtue.

I’m sure many readers will be stunned to find, thanks to Halberstam, hiding out in my piece, a “paean” to Lee Edelman (kidding...). Actually, I’m not sure whether my writing is quite as “unabashedly adoring” as Halberstam claims, but it does side with the theorist-underdogs Halberstam chose as the objects of her original critique. (If I were to write an actual paean, it would be to Roland Barthes, or perhaps to D. A. Miller who wrote a most beautiful one to Barthes.) But yes, I do associate and align myself with the gay male antisocialists in question.

The point of my original exercise, far from deeming Halberstam a grumpy killjoy, was to see how her textual agenda fed off the abject figure of the fruitless (gay male) antisocial while aligning with it: disavowing it, yet seeking to reap, “politically”, its benefits. I do “love” the campy image of the dried out dyke raining over the fabulous fag parade, but I cannot claim authorship to that image; it has Halberstam written all over it. (How hard it is, I should note, to say any of this without seeming sarcastic – this is one of the main challenges of “arguing” in a foreign, and hence so tempting, tongue.)

Let me say, in passing, that I have only ever seen two classic Broadway shows live. The American Songbook comes to me, like most Europeans, via “straight” jazz vocalizing. I was well into my thirties when I first set foot on Manhattan. (My dear Mother did take us to see the film versions of *The Sound of Music* and *My Fair Lady*, an education that many aficionados would probably frown on.) It is safe to say that I am not your typical

Broadway queen, just a plain old Finn masquerading as one. But I will take Halberstam's designation of me as the "punning queen" as the greatest of compliments.

This said, however: I feel compelled to ask, retracing the fraught textures of my original argument, whether the anti-social should really be seen a stance or a role, something that one can actively and dynamically embrace or embody. Halberstam seems to treat the antisocial as just such a choice, one of many paradigms or politics to pick from. We do, of course, consciously apply and employ certain rhetorical positions to tease out the analytical implications of an intellectual(ized) sensibility, but this reworking is probably not what the antisocial is about "at bottom".

Even as a thinker/writer, one tends to the antisocial *in spite of oneself*. I am intrigued and perplexed by the sexual resonances of this stance. If indeed the queer antisocial is a function of sexuality, then this is bound to separate it from other brands of antisociality, say ones that can be *applied*, churned for a social profit. Is this deep sense of societal ill-at-ease just a myth entertained by the (middle-aged and -classed, white hegemonic) male imagination? Or is it indeed something like a *force majeure* (not an identity, perhaps, but a sensibility, one of perpetual at-oddness) that may stem from a particular relation with normative sociality/sexuality? Is such a sensibility/drive more specific to queer men than to queer women? I don't have an answer, but I felt compelled to ask the question.

Although I appreciate most every aspect of Halberstam's response, as a feminist I am troubled to find myself cast in the dreary roles of misogynist spinster-hater and hitchcockian-homosocial. As for my original critique, I was *trying* to engage with a particular text, not a person. Nor was I defending Hitchcock's misogyny, but Edelman's readings of Hitchcock (against claims of conservative elitism). If I am deemed, by SQS readers, guilty as charged

(of misogyny and lesbophobia), I promise to explore critically this facet of my intellectual persona. If, on the other hand, it's "just Halberstam", she is, as the unwitting object of my ungallant analysis, entitled to the most paranoid reading.

There is, perhaps, an *aesthetic of* (mutual) *dis/taste* at work here that would merit study as a structural element. How, why and when – according to what logic – does theory and/or criticism feel compelled to act out abjection within "likeminded" community? Surely it isn't just about power struggle? We should do well to acknowledge, on the other hand, the privileged stage our particular brand of theorizing has reached, enabling us to entertain such "domestic quarrels" instead of focusing on real issues and enemies. Let's be thankful for that privilege – while not taking it for granted.

While our rhetorical quarrels, my own paranoia as well as Halberstam's, may indeed pinpoint some of the potential *Unbehagen* in our queer culture, it also reflects our communitarian tendencies. "Halberstamian" readers will be happily appalled to find out what a chauvinist I am; as for my potential sympathizers, they will be equally entertained by my deconstruction of Halberstam's *faux* antisociality. Long live the *status quo*, alas: men *are* misogynists, after all; and lesbians just don't get it, do they. If camp is a mode whose pleasures come "from being one of the chosen who has ears to hear" – we shall both have tapped into the most social element of camp.

If this moment of cross-Atlantic mutual masturbation gave visibility to some of the more ambivalent attitudes that inform our queer interaction, they continue to be systematically disavowed in theory (somewhat like the climate crisis that most everyone recognizes and ignores). It well may be that these attitudes are a truism in the big world; I am after all writing from the vintage point of Helsinki, where gays and lesbians et. al. used until quite recently to hang out in the same bars.

What remains intriguing to me is the cross-cultural consumption of camp – and, of course, of theory, of theoretical camps. And, finally, let's not forget the issue that remains taboo (although Halberstam touches upon it nicely through shifts in the *modus* of her response): do our stylistic alterities have a chance within the hopelessly straight realm of academic writing practices? There *is* something funny about theory, and we should continue to explore that aspect as well.

In any case I certainly had my decapitation coming to me, given the “anti-homo” stance that I so crudely outed in Judith. My primitive strategy in glossing this moment of inter-queer othering might be compared to that of *apotropaia*: confronting the “Devil in Miss Halberstam” (in her text!; in queer academia!) was but a modest attempt to highlight some of the troubles within the queer, and in so doing to possibly render these troubles less troublesome, less acute (which doesn't have to entail taming them, “socializing” them). Dare I say that I succeeded?

At the end of the day, we are all subject to the stabilizing impulses of the social. As Edelman puts it in his essay on *Bad Education*, we cannot help but become “good citizens despite ourselves“. I hope our (Judith's and mine) little dangerous liaison, our polite flirtation with tactless antipathy, will inspire other writers to pursue these and other issues in much more vigorous and irreverent ways, to keep on messing with sociality. Let's not be afraid of falling, or failing to fall.

P.S.

I am excited to hear that Lady Gaga is Halberstam's new hero. So far, Gaga hasn't really been my cup of tea (nor was Madonna in her heyday; I actually felt more drawn to Cindy Lauper...) But I digress. In a much appreciated gesture, Halberstam offers me her *Gaga Feminism*. As it happens, just last week I submitted my latest manuscript to a local publisher. The book is entitled *Kokottien kultakausi* (“The Golden Age of the Cocotte”) and it deals with Lady Gaga's antecedents in the *Belle Époque*. I would like to mirror Halberstam's gallantry by offering her my book in turn (if and when it comes out). It is written in this most anti-social language of ours, but the pics should provide universal delight. How queer, in any case, that Jack and I should both end up going gaga over larger-than-life *artistes*!

Meanwhile, I will do now what I meant to do before the accident: my homework on Solanas. That is: I shall take Halberstam's cue and read the manifesto earnestly as a camp text. I was, I must admit, too put off by the literality of Solanas's attempt at killing off Warhol, to enjoy her text as just that: a text, and not an agenda.