

MASCULINITY AS A COLLECTIVE CONSTRUCTION

Jack Halberstam: «There are many different ways of being masculine, but do we know how to bring the structure that we call 'masculinity' down?»

Jack Halberstam, Miquel Missé



Illustrator: [Lara Lars](#)

In October 2021, Jack Halberstam was invited to Barcelona to give the inaugural lecture for the opening of the City Council's newly created Plural - Centre on Masculinities. Taking advantage of his visit, we to discuss the evolution of trans experiences, masculinity and public policies.

Halberstam is a leading voice in trans studies as well as in the field of queer and gender theory and is currently a professor at Columbia University in New York. He has published multiple books on these issues, some of which have been translated into Spanish by the EGALES publishing house with the collaboration of the queer activist and translator Javier Sáez, including *El arte queer del fracaso* [*The Queer Art of Failure*], *Trans** and *Criaturas salvajes* [*Wild Things*]. Perhaps the most important book by Jack Halberstam, however, and which forms the basis of this interview, is *Female Masculinity*, which he published in 1998

and which was translated into Spanish 10 years later (EGALES, 2008). In the book, Halberstam looked at the forms of masculinity that are not embodied by cis men but by trans women and men. From that perspective, he sparked a series of innovative debates and dialogues on masculinity which are still valid today, 24 years later. At the same time, and as evidenced in this interview, Halberstam has not lost the ability to reconsider his own positions when looking back at his work with the perspective of time, pointing out new questions, nuances or contradictions in his reflections.

To begin with, I would like to look back and ask you about some of your main contributions from the book *Female Masculinity*. This work that you published 24 years ago is still a compass for many people today when it comes to structuring current debates. I would like to revisit some of the questions you asked yourself in the book. The first one is: “If masculinity is not the social, cultural, or political expression of manhood, then what is it?” And that’s where I wanted to start our conversation: what is masculinity?

Masculinity is the repertoire of behaviours that we tend to associate with men or that we demand of male bodies but, obviously, it doesn’t stay fixed to the male body because we live in a very diverse cultural context. And, as long as gender as a system is understood as binary, there will be people who cross-identify. So, masculinity is a very diverse set of expressions that have been understood in relation to the male body but that go beyond it.

In the book you said: “In this society it is surprisingly easy not to look like a woman. In comparison, it is relatively difficult not to look like a man.” What makes femininity so diffuse and masculinity so precise?

Very simple. Masculinity is protected. White masculinity is protected and reserved for white men because it comes with enormous social privilege and therefore the range of expressions that are understood to be proper are quite narrow. While femininity is not socially privileged, white femininity is more privileged than racialized femininities. But, at the same time, femininity itself is understood to be a very broad set of cultural expressions and it’s not particularly surveilled and guarded.

More than 20 years have passed since your proposal regarding female masculinities. Do you think it is still a useful category?

That’s a good question. It is not as useful as it used to be, mostly because the cultural understanding of people who are cross-identified is now very strongly tied to transgender identity. And, therefore, if somebody early on in life expresses persistent modes of female masculinity, they will probably identify themselves as trans. That doesn’t mean the category is exhausted by trans identification, but it does change what we mean by the various categories of gender variance.

In fact, in the prologue for the Spanish edition, from 2008, you wrote that in the future “female masculinity” will substitute “lesbian identity”. Today, would you have written “trans male identity” will substitute “lesbian identity”?

But it's different, because I think many trans men will not say that they express female masculinity. They will simply say they are men and have been male all along and they will bypass that category all together, because it presumes the female body is the basis for a particular kind of gender expression and for trans men that's not how they are articulating their masculinity at all. And I understand that.

At that moment, you mapped the tensions, borders and limits between the butch lesbian communities and the transgender men communities in the North American context. Faced with the visibility and popularization of the experiences of trans men, you wondered whether it would have consequences on the viability of butch identities; if the emergence of trans-masculine identities would modify the identifications of masculine women. Do you think that any of that has ended up happening?

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Yes. Things change and we don't need to fight those changes or be so worried that an earlier mode of expression or queer identity has maybe shifted and changed as the social orientation towards trans identities has shifted. Necessarily, these in-between categories like "butch" or "female masculinity" will not have the same impact or be as important. I don't think this is a concern and don't even know whether young people do or do not identify as butch, I honestly don't know. It requires some new research to find out how prevalent these categories still are. I know there are lots of people who identify as trans and some people who are happy with using the category butch, but I also know that a large number of young people now identify as "non-binary." And with the category of non-binary they are able to say "no" to the *either/or* option of transitioning or being gay. And they are saying, "I don't know yet what my bodily configuration means to me, and I'm going to wait and see." And some people will remain in the category of non-binary their whole life and other people will find other expressions. And I think that "non-binary" is a good response to the *either/or* option for gender expression that people are being given.

Do you think that narratives of transition have received more media attention in recent years because they fit better into a neoliberal context? Do trans masculine identities fit in better than butch identities?

If you transition in a way that allows you to be absorbed back into a gender binary, I'm sure that that comes with certain advantages, but the truth is that transphobia is persistent enough not to allow for those privileges to be enjoyed by most trans people. But then these

are rapidly changing fields of identification and what we may say about them one year may change in the next. And that's true for many of those who have very recently been theorizing on the topic of trans identities. Who knows if, in 10 years, the very radical claims that people have been making about trans histories or trans children might suddenly look conservative in another period, depending on what happens next. And so, in the period of time that I've been writing about trans—let's say from the late 90s to the present—things that I might have said in the mid-nineties I might not say five years later, and things I said five years later I wouldn't say today. And, similarly, even things that I wrote in *Trans** about trans children being sometimes maybe pressured into transition, I wouldn't say now because of the way gender conservative feminists (TERFs) and other gender conservatives have managed the discourse of transition and have cast desires for transition among the young as false-consciousness or the result of coercion.

In relation to the most current debates between trans and feminist movements in the Spanish context, tensions between lesbian women and trans people have been running high because some feminist sectors argue that the rise of trans-masculine identities is problematic because it seduces many adolescent girls who are in conflict with feminine normativity. How do you think the debate can be redirected from a queer position, which recognizes that transsexuality is not a biological essence but has to do with culture?

Well, first, let's not forget that the false consciousness angle is just a really simplistic way of understanding gender identification among young people. All people in the gender-binarized society are pushed this way or that way by all kinds of training. And yet, people do not assume that it is simply coercive to train boys to be masculine and aggressive or to train girls to be quiet and compliant. In fact, these forms of training can be disastrous, but they are not the target of gender conservative critique. The big problem has to do with the normative training. So, I think we should just shift the whole conversation away from trans gender expression and start focusing on toxic normativity.

Although I don't imagine that you conceive of gender transition as a failure (in the sense of the itinerary being complicit with gender normativity), you have been very critical of the discourses around trans people that are perfectly assimilable into a neoliberal system. I wanted to ask you how we should be thinking about these three axes: failure, transition and gender normativity. And, above all, how we can do it in an empowering way for trans people or people who want to live with fewer gender discomforts in their lives.

There are bigger problems in the world than the small groups of TERFS who make transitioning teens their focus. I see that such groups are trying to control the discourse in places like the UK and are making some headway, but we also need to articulate a trans politics that is less concerned with these kooks and more interested in connecting trans issues to large social justice projects.

Let's talk about transmasculinity. In 1998 with *Female Masculinity* you pointed out that a new discourse was emerging on masculinity embodied in the experiences

and discourses around male transsexuality. You wondered if trans masculinity could be based on a lesbophobic imaginary or if those identities could end up reinforcing the heteronorm. And I wanted to ask you about that: what discourses on masculinity have transmasculine identities brought to the table and, above all, what contributions do you find interesting?

I don't know which trans masculine experiences you mean because there are so many different experiences. What I do know is that some of the radical work coming out of trans masculinities has been very helpful in thinking about larger critiques. People are not just saying "trans masculinity means" and then narrating a story about trans masculinity. Theorists such as Paul B. Preciado or Dean Spade or Riley Snorton have made really big theoretical contributions based on accounts of trans masculinity within larger social structures. And so, for Preciado, trans bodies give us access to an understanding of the way that big pharma controls bodies from within at the molecular level. And, for Dean Spade, studies of trans identities are part of an abolitionist project to change the racist and carceral structures of neoliberalism. And, for Riley Snorton, the histories of trans masculinity and trans femininity are part of a longer narrative about the production of black subjugation during and after slavery. And as far as I'm concerned, those are the most important contributions. Having lots and lots of narratives about the specifics of gender transition on an individual level can be less helpful than these ambitious theories of bodies, transformation, social structures and change.

In the Spanish context we have had practically no voices of trans men speaking directly about masculinity. What we have seen are some North American trans activists like Thomas Page McBee or Rocco Kayiatos who have launched into reflections and projects that contribute to questioning dominant masculinities from a trans-masculine perspective. Do you think that the position of trans men can be interesting in a dialogue with cis men regarding the male experience and sexism?

There are lots of people who identify as trans and some people who are happy using the category butch, but there's also a large number of young people now identify as "non-binary", meaning they are able to say "no" to the either/or option of transitioning or being gay

I don't think it's exactly right to put it in those terms, saying that in North America these conversations are beginning to happen. I mean, in North America the publishing industry has actually supported the production of some extraordinary trans memoirs like Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* and Paul B. Preciado's *Testo yonqui* and Daniel Lavery's *Something that May Shock and Discredit You*, and so there is now a market for writerly versions of the trans memoir. This last book, for example, by Daniel Lavery, is a hilarious book about his

story of transition that turns the conventional trans memoir on its head and fits in a story of transition between comic analyses of TV shows, films, and the career of William Shatner, not to mention the author's Christian's upbringing. This book is very different from some of the earnest memoirs that circulate and that repeat the same narrative over and over. Lavery's book is funny and erudite and it uses satire, pathos, absurdity and stand-up comedy to brighten up the conventional narrative of becoming trans.

In your presentation at the *Masculí Plural* conference to open the Barcelona City Council's Centre on Masculinities, you talked about "man unmade". What do you mean by that idea?

I mean that we spend too much time in these kinds of genres, like the memoir, thinking what *makes* a man. I argue that we might reorient the conversation towards deconstructing masculinity, which I think Paul B. Preciado is doing in *Testo yonqui*, taking manliness apart and not putting it back together again but, rather, allowing masculinity to be in a state of collapse. So, I presented a theory of *collapsing masculinity* that I hope will be more useful than a narrative about the legitimacy of alternative masculinities. We know there are many different ways of being masculine, different from normative masculinity, that deserve recognition but do we know how to bring the structure that we call "masculinity" down? I gave some examples of people who are interested in doing just that.

Would you agree with the idea that masculinity is something necessarily negative and that we should abolish masculinity?

No. You cannot abolish such categories of being. That's not what abolition means to me. Abolition is an approach to dominant institutions and systems of control. And there are certain forms of masculinity, dominant white masculinity, that will go the way of whatever institution we want to bring down. But when I talk about collapse it's more about rethinking the orientation of masculinity than seeking to end it as if such a thing was even possible.

On your idea of resignifying the supposed failure of queer lives, Clara Serra, in her podcast "Los hombres de verdad tienen curvas" [Real men have curves], uses your proposal from *The Queer Art of Failure* to think about how to resignify experiences that have been understood as failures to comply with normative masculinity. Following this reflection, what contributions can queer politics make to the redefinition of these male failures, or what is considered a failure for men?

In *The Queer Art of Failure* I discuss a logic within which success has been tethered to capitalism, profit, ability, whiteness and all such markers of the dominant. And failure is part of a queer critique of normativity. So, if we wanted to extend that logic to white men it wouldn't just be a matter of saying to white men, "Hey you know, it's OK to fail." It will be a matter of changing the entire system such that white men do not always appear as a successful version of subjectivity within that culture. And that's a bigger shift than just saying to a man, "Hey you know, it's OK to fail." But in my talk I discussed two artists from the 1970s who are deeply interested in architectures of collapse. These representations of collapsing buildings are also tied to thinking about the male body as something that can fail

in relation to sexual conquest – and so, detumescence figures strongly, rather than an erect, ever-ready, pneumatic masculinity that stands (literally) for phallic mastery.

What do you think about public policies that aim to promote reflection on masculinity in order to transform it?

It's probably the least interesting thing for me, to make policy. Policy is just an extension of this institutional investment. So, no such policy could change anything. You change things by working from below. For example, change policy so that men do not make more money than women, so that white men are not overrepresented in government, so that women have the material resources that they need to raise children with or without men. So just setting a policy about masculinity won't work unless it is backed up by a more general and abiding shift in consciousness. Unilateral policy changes that don't reflect social consent to those changes are probably not going to work. And so we end with collapse!



Jack Halberstam

Jack Halberstam is a professor at the University of Southern California (USC), where he has been director of the Center for Feminist Research. He is also visiting professor at Columbia University. His book *Female Masculinity* (Duke UP, 1998), which has become a classic of *queer* literature, covers the different forms of masculinity developed by women over the last three centuries. The study and critique of forms of gender representation are the focus of much of his work, with titles such as *The Drag King Book* (1999, with artist Del LaGrace Volcano), *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005) and *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal* (2013).



Miquel Missé

Miquel Missé is a sociologist and a trans activist involved in different lines of work that range from research, pedagogy and the generation of projects in which culture and thought are intertwined. He is an independent consultant and trainer in the field of public policies for sexual and gender diversity, and collaborates as an external researcher with the Line of Studies on Sexual and Gender Diversity of the University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia. Together with Gerard Coll-Planas, he has edited *El género desordenado: críticas en torno a la patologización de la transexualidad* (EGALES, 2010); together with Pol Galofre, he also edited the book *Políticas trans: una antología desde los estudios trans norteamericanos* (EGALES, 2015). He is the author of the book *Transexualidades: otras miradas posibles* (EGALES, 2013) and more recently he has published *A la conquista del cuerpo equivocado* (EGALES, 2018).