

• *Book Reviews* •

In A Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives. By Judith Halberstam. (New York: New York University Press, 2005. Pp 256.)

In writing my Master's thesis on the impact of death beliefs on the sale of real estate, I learned a lot about liminal spaces, the places—hallways, corridors, doorways—that are betwixt and between the “real” places. It is in these liminal spaces that ghosts and others not entirely of this world lurk, slipping in and out of sight at times that aren't always entirely convenient for the living. In *In A Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Judith Halberstam describes the liminal worlds occupied by the living, breathing human beings who do not precisely fit the social categories laid out by reproduction and long-established social conventions.

The titular term “queer” is not being used here to strictly mean homosexual, as it tends to be understood by the mainstream heterosexual community, but rather as it is claimed and redefined by the transgender community. By the same token, “transgender” is not here conflated with “transsexual”; the latter term is generally understood as a person who is *transitioning* between one sex and another, from the wrong body to the right one as it were. “Queer” encompasses this as well as the myriad possibilities of those living in the liminal spaces between genetically male or female.

The best example of this concept also makes up the bulk of the book. The first chapter looks at queer geographies and the way in which perceptions of external and internal locales can impact the public view of a “lifestyle choice” and

the assumptions made about the end result of that choice. This grounding is used to frame the next two chapters, which help to form what Halberstam calls the “Brandon Archives,” that is, the story of the life and death of Brandon Teena (portrayed by Hillary Swank in the movie *Boys Don’t Cry*), who was raped and murdered in a Nebraska town for violating societal norms of sex and gender.

While the chapters are ostensibly about Brandon, they focus on various portrayals of his life and death, considering whether the cameras and the writers looked with a “queer eye” at the crime and its contextual backing. Halberstam branches out to examine other films and literature that cross similar ground, the most notable being the film *The Crying Game*, where the “big secret” of Jaye Davidson’s transexuality is made so much of in the popular press that the fact the film is really about the bifurcation of Ireland on religious grounds is essentially forgotten. Documentaries, written works, and other queer-themed films are also viewed in relation to point of view, but the discussion always circles back to Brandon.

This book is in a large sense, a literature review. Halberstam looks not so much at queer lives themselves, but at how those lives are portrayed in literature, academic writing, film, photography and painting. This multi-media perspective takes on additional layers by examining the lives and deaths the transgendered as seen from both esoteric and exoteric perspectives. By incorporating these diverse insider/outsider perspectives, Halberstam forces the reader to accept the idea that

regardless of where one is geographically or emotionally located, the concept of the “other” is largely a matter of where s/he stands.

My only real complaint with book is that it, like its subjects, is not always one thing or another. Despite being framed for better than half its length by the Brandon Teena story, once the “Brandon Archives” have been left behind, they are essentially forgotten. The latter half focuses more on the many possibilities presented by refusing or being unable to fit within the gender norms society places in front of us. This is interesting and eye-opening but in some ways might have been better as a separate book, as the connective tissue that runs between the two sections is there almost more by inference than actuality.

Ideally, I would have liked to have seen more of each of the subjects covered in the last few chapters; the ways that travelers in the liminal geographies of the world view themselves is eye opening. However, despite not quite fitting into my preconceived categories, this book is well worth reading. It also provides an excellent roadmap for those interested in other works of a similar nature.

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