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Literary Theory and Criticism

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27 October 2014

Queer Theory External Reading:

Judith Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* Annotation

[Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. Print.](http://www.bibme.org/)

Judith Halberstam’s theoretical and queer criticism text, *The Queer Art of Failure*, addresses the concept of success and offers its alternative: failure; specifically, Halberstam briefly examines the ineffective role success has within the United States and offers her criticism of popular culture and modern art to convey her overarching theory that “failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2). Throughout her analysis and critique of “failing” art, Halberstam formulates more specific theories that cater to her topic. For example, in her chapter addressing masochism, Halberstam explains that masochism is an effective and beneficial form of failure in which “the libido tends to ward off the death drive through a ‘will to power,’ [and] a desire for mastery, and an externalization of erotic energy, sometimes libidinal energies are given over to destabilization, unbecoming, and unraveling” (136). Other theories derive from her criticism of postmodern visual art. For example, her interpretations from “feminist” performances conclude that there is a call for a more effective form of failure: “radical passivity;” “radical passivity” refers to “the willingness of the subject to actually come undone, to dramatize unbecoming as a function of her or his own body—”a theory that Halberstam implies to be the most effective resistance of the heteronormative success (140). Beyond Halberstam’s extensive analysis and corresponding theories, she is acutely conscious of her approach in conveying her theories and, therefore, a look into her approach is worthwhile to mention to the extent that her field of criticism may be better understood.

From the very beginning of her work, Halberstam sets the stage for her high theory-low theory examination as she offers a *SpongeBob Squarepants* reference to introduce her complex of topic of heteronormative success and failure as its alternative. Halberstam explains that her approach to address the topic is in attempt to challenge the high theorists but also to ensure that her work maintains a sense of accessibility (2); in fact, the accessibility Halberstam achieves is even encompassing of the alternative “failing” community she intends to represent as she practices her own sense of “unbecoming” in the context of the theoretical and academic world:

On behalf of such a detour of “proper” knowledge, each chapter that follows will lose its way in the territories of failure, forgetfulness, stupidity, and negation. We will wander, improvise, fall short, and move in circles. We will lose our way, our cars, our agenda, and possibly our minds, but in losing we will find another way of making meaning in which…no one gets left behind. (Halberstam 25)

As Halberstam reveals her approach in addressing success and failure, readers are reassured that her theory is open and accessible.

In order to understand the validity Halberstam’s work carries into the discussion of queer theory, it is important to examine its connection to Robert Dale Parker’s chapter on queer theory in his *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies*. First of all, I think there is a solid agreement between Halberstam and Parker as Parker explains in his chapter the concept of compulsory heterosexuality; since Halberstam’s theories and criticisms are based on the fact that “success” is evidence of the impression “that people should be heterosexual or else something is wrong with them,” then it is no doubt that both authors understand the role of compulsory heterosexuality and its implications in theory and criticism (Parker 187). Parker also offers the concept that the purpose of queer theory is to “challenge essentialized notions of what feminine and masculine might mean,” and it is evident by Halberstam’s theories that she intends to challenge gender roles (189); in fact, Halberstam offers Nao Bustamante’s “America the Beautiful” in her discussion of “unbecoming” gender roles as she explains Bustamante’s performance which satirizes the feminine pursuit of beauty (142-143). Finally, Parker and Halberstam both pose the questions that are encompassing of queer theory, “How do characters with queer desires respond to the cultural resistance to queer desire? Can they ignore it? Do they oppose it? Do they internalize and accept it, or find themselves caught between ignoring, opposing, and adopting such attitudes?” (Parker 216). As far as these two authors are concerned, I think both would agree that queer theory should lend itself to organize resistance.