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WITHOUT KNOWING WHAT COMES NEXT: A REVIEW OF JACK HALBERSTAM'S *WILD THINGS: THE DISORDER OF DESIRE*

Alexandra Chiasson

Jack Halberstam's most recent book, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), gives fresh insight into "the wild," a structuring logic he argues was forged to uplift a white, heterosexual, and colonialist (shaky) binary narrative of civilization versus nature, human versus animal, safe and tempered order versus dangerous and disastrous disorder. As Halberstam writes in the introduction to *Wild Things*' first half, "[W]hile the wild is tethered to nature in our imaginations, or to one particular version of nature, wildness is not limited to the natural world, and it has an extensive life elsewhere too—in aesthetics, politics, theory, and desire" (ix). Thus, wildness can serve as a tool in these same areas that can be deployed against a collective fantasy of control over the wild, against the deliberate restraint of the domestic, and in support of a disorder of things, which Halberstam reads in texts employed throughout the book to showcase a corresponding "disorder of desire." Built into this extension of Foucauldian biopower, Sedgwick's epistemologies, and his own work against category and order—*The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), in particular, feels like a spiritual prequel to *Wild Things*—is a compulsion to understand the wilderness and those things that resist understanding.

As is characteristic of Halberstam's work, which often works against discipline, *Wild Things* constitutes a dense, overwhelming syllabus attending to texts of all sorts. The title alludes to Maurice Sendak's picture book, *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), which serves as inspiration and textual object for the book and receives careful treatment in chapter 4. Also of particular interest to Halberstam are the poems of T. S. Eliot; the diary entries of Roger Casement; Vaslav Nijinsky's choreography and Igor Stravinsky's score for the ballet *The Rite of Spring* (1913); two-spirit Indigenous Canadian artist Kent Monkman's video installations and paintings; J. A. Baker's *The Peregrine* (1967) and other writings about falconry; Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001); the animated movie *The Secret*

Life of Pets (2016); a selection of television shows and films about zombies; and seemingly countless other artifacts. In the preface, Halberstam describes his project as not containing “a central argument sweeping all the thoughts along toward a punch line; rather, [he offers] a vocabulary for wildness that might hold some of the pieces of [the book] in productive tension” (xii). While pieces of *Wild Things* appear free to roam and meander here and there, Halberstam remains intent on providing as many complementary definitions of “wild” as humanly (with plenty of caveats for the limits and outer limits of “human”) possible.

Wild Things is divided into two parts: “Sex in the Wild” and “Animality,” with two separate introductions (“Sex before, after, and against Nature” and “Animals Wild and Tame,” respectively). Chapter 1, “Wildness, Loss, and Death,” begins with the diaries of Roger Casement (1864–1916), a friend of Joseph Conrad’s, Irish diplomat, and early humanitarian who worked in the Congo and was tried and hung for treason after he advocated for Irish nationalism and pushed for war against England. His diaries—which alluded to sexual desire and relationships with young Black and Brown men in the Congo and Peruvian Amazon—were released before his execution. As a result, Casement lost the support of Irish Catholics. Casement is of interest here because he is often remembered as a kind of anticolonial protogay hero, but, as Halberstam writes, “he expresses in all of its glorious complexity the contradictory set of desires for wildness that we cannot call homosexuality or heterosexuality, that defy classification, for better or for worse, and that stand outside of the conventional terrain we have reserved for more orderly narratives of sexuality” (34). Furthermore, Halberstam dissects the appeal of the wild—set in clear opposition to colonial power—that drew in Casement in the first place, forcing the recognition that “we have to read the legacy of Casement as both an activist against British rule and the violence of colonial missions *and* as a colonial subject who saw Black and Brown bodies as erotic commodities” (44).

“A New Kind of Wildness,” the second chapter, is the strongest. Halberstam presents a stunning analytical pairing: Stravinsky and Nijinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*, now a fixture of Western canonical ballet, and the artwork of Kent Monkman. In the first half of the chapter, Halberstam untames *The Rite of Spring* and transports the reader to 1913 to consider its “once . . . runaway performance of madness, queerness, the feral and exhaustion” (53). This premise of a forgotten “queer history of mad coincidences, wild dreaming, and a palpable sense of possibility and change” (54)—introduced through the “aesthetic of bewilderment” (53) that defined *Rite*’s reception at the time of its first performance—gives

way to a theorization of “un-art,” by which Halberstam means “cultural productions . . . not intended to convey beauty, not organized around the notion of singular genius expression, not designed to soothe audiences and to confirm the order of things” (54). Halberstam moves to expose the lingering colonial logics of the wild as spectacle underscoring even this admittedly groundbreaking queer performance through examining the “aesthetic of bewilderment” in the work of Kent Monkman, also known as Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, a two-spirit Swampy Kree artist. In 2008, Monkman displayed a video installation titled *Dance to the Berdashe* that showcased his performance of “traditional powwow and contemporary dance” to a “free syncopated version” of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* (70). To preface his discussion of Monkman, Halberstam writes, “[W]hat the colonizer cannot understand, what he is bewildered by, becomes the source of chaos and noise and represents a chaotic world of ungovernable peoples. . . . But by the same token, peoples who fear conquest, and who seek to be and to become ungovernable, might anchor the noise that represents them or the silence or the brutality to their own aesthetic projects” (69). Moving into a reading of Monkman’s paintings, which “creat[e] a counternarrative of conquest” (71), Halberstam posits these works as representing “a wild aesthetic, cacophonous and straining the boundaries of genre and history” (71).

Chapter 3, “The Epistemology of the Ferox: Sex, Death, and Falconry,” identifies the “erotic pull” of the feral (123), with a particular focus on the relationship between birds of prey and humans in literature. Placing Tim Morton’s “queer ecology”—the networking of human/animal/land relations amid “unfathomable intimacies,” which can describe pleasures beyond the limits of the body and sexual ideologies—into conversation with Sedgwick’s closet, Halberstam creates the term “epistemology of the ferox.” This term captures a patterned longing for the untamed bird he has traced across writings about falconry and suggests that wildness exists in an “eternal present that defines a queer temporality for both hawk and human joins itself to the past not through traditions or the grand procession of history but through an inherited sense of unknowing and disorder” (111). Similarly, chapter 4, “Where the Wild Things Are: Humans, Animals, and Children,” provides close readings of Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* and Martel’s *Life of Pi* that emphasize the animality of the child through its relationships with animals and confrontations with the wild, which is depicted in opposition to the home and the zoo in these works. Martel, Halberstam argues, suggests that humans are prone to misreading the will of animals. In contrast, Halberstam writes, “[If], as children do with animals, we identify with the other, make faith with the other, and acknowledge in the other

our own pathetic insignificance, our mortality, our vulnerability, then we come closer still to the wildness that is not the opposite of freedom after all, but just a quest to survive another day” (145). Here, *Wild Things* maps out the affinity between animal and child, namely a “quest” (a favorite word of Halberstam’s) to “survive” the experience of being made other relative to “adult human subjectivities” (56).

“Zombie Antihumanism at the End of the World,” the fifth and final chapter, develops Halberstam’s idea of “zombie humanism.” Halberstam uses this term to describe how humans employ “other creatures that exist only as our prosthetic extensions” (116) to remind ourselves that we are alive. Sure to provoke is Halberstam’s assertion that pet ownership is nothing less than the zombification of household pets, which we deliberately hold in a state of living death and keep around to make us feel more human: “The wild, increasingly, is a fantasy of before, a lingering trace of precapitalist logics of life and death; the wild, we imagine, still lives in the family pet, but it dies there too” (117). Complete with a brief polemic against dog ownership in New York City and Los Angeles, Halberstam argues that “far from being sites of love, pet cultures are rife with violence . . . [and] the domestication of animals is central to the hierarchies that sustain human exceptionalism” (150). Halberstam extends this argument to include all bodies “we have assigned to the gray zone between the good life and bare life,” likening the suffering, marginalized, and oppressed people occupying this biopolitical gray zone to zombies (174). Halberstam posits that “the zombie [figures as] a kind of parahuman force, a collective subject reaching from beyond the grave to exact bloody revenge from regimes of law, order, and truth” (166). While this chapter seems to rhyme with recent work on posthumanism, Halberstam does not engage substantially with this concept or use the word “posthuman” in his discussion of zombie humanism.

In “Conclusions,” one feels most acutely *Wild Things*’ discomfort at existing as a book, an ordered, tightly restrained thing that must eventually end. The final section is a swirling whirlpool of reading for the wild in Eliot and Tennyson poetry and stray yet powerful final thoughts about the crushing force of the ocean inspired by a nautical myth about the doomed “ninth wave” and Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016). In reading *Wild Things*, students of sexuality, race, postcolonial, and animal studies will find new, queer ways of thinking through these fields, particularly those who are friendly to a rejection of disciplinarity. Many readers will also find a blueprint for these radical politics of bewilderment in *Wild Things*. Halberstam concludes the introduction to the first section of the book with this appeal: “Can we, unlike

Max, enter the wild rumpus, the disorder of desire, not to tame it nor to perform wildness with it, but to eschew the order of things with its private property, its cooked meals, and its family homes? Can we instead live with the bewilderment that accompanies the desire to end that world without knowing what comes next” (32)? Perhaps embracing disorder, what is out of our control, and the end of a known world has never been easier or more difficult. Indeed, with an October 2020 publication date, *Wild Things* entered its public amid the now clichéd but still true terms: the “uncertain times” of pandemic, one that continues to affect all of us unevenly and without a clear trajectory or hope for a stable future. One can imagine Halberstam both irritated and relieved at the narrow miss for a COVID coda, or possible “Nature Is Healing” chapter for this book.¹ In this situation of “without knowing what comes next,” ready made for his radical vision for the embracing of bewilderment, Halberstam instructs: “[U]nbuild the world you inhabit, unmake its relentless commitment to the same, ignore the calls for more, and agree to be with the wild, accept the wild, give yourself to the wild, and float or drown in its embrace” (180). This is not an opportunity for “liberation,” “progress,” or even a return to some falsely reassuring fantasy of an untarnished natural past, Halberstam might say, but a chance to convene in shared bewilderment to dismantle oppressive order.

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NOTES

1. For a revealing discussion of the rhetoric of “nature is healing” and “returning to the wild” internet memes following pandemic-shutdown-era ecological changes, see Kai Bosworth, “The Bad Environmentalism of ‘Nature Is Healing’ Memes,” *Cultural Geographies* 29, no. 3 (April 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740211012007>.

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