

We Have Laws for That: A Response to Jack Halberstam

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JACK HALBERSTAM'S EVOCATIVE DESCRIPTION of a fellow airline passenger's service animal is both an artful performance of queer negativity and an outstanding example of the nested interdependencies that are the subject of my essay. While we can assume the passenger enjoys a rewarding interdependency with her service dog, in the close confines of an airplane their relationship inevitably impacts her fellow travelers, perhaps bringing cheer to some, but also inspiring disgruntlement and skepticism in others. The lesson here is that caring relationships do not exist in isolation; they are, for better or worse, embedded in a network of relations that shapes the quality and sustainability of any particular care transaction.

I like the panache of Halberstam's description, even as it renewed my appreciation for the Americans with Disabilities Act. Regardless of whether we enjoy flying with a dog underfoot, our Frequent Flier status, or our willingness to acknowledge the validity of another person's claim to a disabling condition, the Americans with Disabilities Act is there to ensure—albeit imperfectly—that people with disabilities receive reasonable accommodations, including the right to bring approved service and emotional support animals onto an airplane. We have laws because there are limits to human benevolence (and, indeed, it is ethically problematic to make benevolence the basis for a right to disability accommodation). The fact that people sometimes take advantage of existing laws does not invalidate the laws themselves or the commitment to justice on which they are founded. And despite its many flaws and limitations, I would rather live with the Americans with Disabilities Act than without it.

But laws aren't the subject of my essay. It is appropriate that Halberstam writes about his feelings because my essay is concerned with the untidy and morally ambiguous terrain of aesthetics, most relevantly described by Tobin Siebers as a field that "tracks the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies."¹ However, he also misrepresents my definition of care by claiming that it depends on "certain definitions of the human and revolves around an idea of benevolent human regard."²

This is indeed the position of some philosophers of care and, while I am all in favor of kindness, I agree with Halberstam that we cannot rely on benevolence to ensure that species' needs are met. This is why, as I explain in my essay, it is essential to understand care, whether paid or unpaid, not simply as an attitude but as a form of work that is, in the most literal terms, an expenditure of energy. As I define it, "care is a limited resource that is unjustly extracted from women and people of color, who are worn away with the toil of sustaining others while their own needs go unmet."³

In their ideal form, gestures of care are accompanied by feelings of generosity, kindness, and compassion, but they can also be underpinned by currents of negativity, resentment, animosity, and disgust. In examples from my essay, we see Kathy High use art to confront her disgust at the wretched state of lab animal survivors and ask how we can attempt to repair something that we also find repulsive. Caitlin Berrigan's performance with human blood is an act of interspecies care, but one deliberately fashioned to elicit discomfort and anxiety. And Richard Powers's human protagonists care about old trees and about each other, while showing no regard at all for other people's property, safety, or well-being. The questions underlying my essay, and the larger research project it comes from, are how do we care for vulnerable others in a world where we cannot rely on benevolence, kindness, or empathy, and what are the consequences of our failures?

The other prong of Halberstam's response that merits attention has to do with sex. Halberstam complains, via queer theory, that the world of care is sterile and unerotic. It "includes love but not sex, physical contact but not erotic exchange, mutuality but not naked power," he writes. "Care, in other words, is a highly restricted suite of interactions, often flowing in one direction, stripped of eros, bathed in benevolence and oriented toward a reparative understanding of relation."⁴ Halberstam makes me aware that sex is sadly absent from my essay, which focuses on works of art and literature that (at least as I read them) are more interested in the ways sex is instrumentalized in the service of species reproduction than in the terrain of fantasy and desire. Neither Powers nor Sue Burke have much to say about the erotic, and High and Aganetha Dyck are more concerned with reproduction than in the sexual drives that sometimes precede it.

Although my essay doesn't say much about sex, Halberstam gives me an opportunity to talk about the role of sexuality and desire in the book I am writing. I agree with Halberstam that too often desire is taboo in our understanding of good care relationships because it is simply too dangerous to consider the consequences of erotic charges flowing among

such unequal parties. All too often the care of vulnerable people—children, ill, disabled, or elderly dependents and their caregivers—is accompanied by sexual abuse. But it is also true that the concern with safety may deprive dependents of self-expression and leave vital needs unmet. Our failure to address the erotics of care more openly can further disadvantage dependents and their caregivers by denying that they may have sexual desires as real as their need for life-sustaining care. In my book I talk about the intersection of sex and care in artworks like Richard Prince's paintings of sexy nurses and Therese Frare's iconic photograph of a man dying of AIDS, his expression merging suffering with orgasmic oblivion. I consider the century's long speculation about sex in the queer partnership of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan, and the erotic fantasies and frustrations of institutionalized teens in Susan Nussbaum's novel, *Good Kings, Bad Kings*. I take Halberstam's response as an invitation to seek out representations of interspecies relationships that engage more fully with the merger of desire and care.

One promising start is the emotional support peacock that Halberstam mentions as an example of the somewhat absurd limits of what counts as an emotional support animal. Provoked by Halberstam's repeated references to the bird, I set out to learn more about the case of an airline passenger—an artist who goes by the name of Ventiko—who attempted to bring a peacock aboard a United Airlines flight from Newark to LAX. It turns out they were not allowed to fly, and her case prompted airlines to specify the requirements for approved service and emotional comfort animals. I also learned that Ventiko had acquired the peacock, named Dexter, to participate in an installation piece for Art Basel. When the exhibit closed, she had trouble finding an appropriate home for Dexter, and eventually decided to keep him in her apartment in Bushwick. For more than four years, they enjoyed a relationship that Ventiko described as loving and companionable. Bushwick residents reported seeing the two out for a stroll, human and bird appearing mutually satisfied and bringing a welcome flair to their artsy neighborhood. After the airline incident, their partnership shot to Instagram fame, and Ventiko continued to document it until Dexter's death in 2018. I cannot speak to whether theirs was an erotic relationship, although Ventiko describes it as tender and physically intimate (she posted on Instagram, for example, that Dexter loved to stick his head inside her mouth and nestle against the skin of her neck). Nor can I speak to what Dexter got out of the relationship, beyond abundant photographic evidence of his flourishing. I am content with the idea that interspecies relationships, like those between human animals, always involve some degree of unknowability. And if we consider the long and intimate partnership of Ventiko and

Dexter as itself a collaborative performance, I can think of no better example of the art of interspecies care.

NOTES

- 1 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2010), 1.
- 2 Jack Halberstam, "Beyond Caring: Human-Animal Interdependency," response to Rachel Adams, "The Art of Interspecies Care," *New Literary History* 51, no. 4: (2020): TK.
- 3 Adams, "The Art of Interspecies Care," TK.
- 4 Halberstam, "Beyond Caring," TK.