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BOOK REVIEW

Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire, by Jack Halberstam. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2020. $25.95 U.S., paper. ISBN: 978-1-4780-1108-8. Pages: 1-240.

Reviewed by McKenna James Boeckner[1]

Sail me back over years, in and out of weeks, and into the night to find my father beside me in my bed: Max and Maurice Sendak's wild rumpus sliding me into sleep. Years later now, my father on the verge of retirement—freed time lost in his thoughts—and knowing how I am studying in New Brunswick to become a writer, pitches me story ideas: "It will be a prequel" he explains, "or sequel" he extrapolates; "It will explore exactly where the wild things are, and where they have gone." I do not have the heart to tell him this has already been written—academically, that is, in the theoretical musings of Jack Halberstam. In his new book, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020), Halberstam tracks the rhetorical presence of those wild things from Sendak's infamous children's book as they manifest in contemporary and historical knowledge production and offer theoretical potential as anti-colonial and anti-heteronormative genealogical tools. Like Sendak's wild things, Halberstam calls us to reorient human-nonhuman intimacies, to unmake our postcolonial worlds, and to freefall into our ecocritically wild erotic ontologies; Halberstam's work asks the question: "what was nature in the realm of sexuality, and when and why did we leave nature behind?" (15).

Known largely in the field of queer theory for his formative focus on female masculinities, Halberstam's more recent work has focused on elaborating queer(ed) embodiments in/of time and space. In this vein, *Wild Things* represents Halberstam's first book-length foray into what can be considered ecocriticism or queer ecologies. A companion volume on the same topic, *Wild Beyond: Art, Architecture, and Anarchy*, is scheduled to be released in 2022. In line with his writings since *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Halberstam's *Wild Things*, as well as his promotions for *Wild Beyond*, betray his characteristic lighthearted reliance on low theory, academically discredited but theoretically viable forms of knowledge production found in children's media. Framing the *Wild Things* are campy references beyond Sendak into DreamWorks Animation's *Madagascar* (2005), Adele's "Hello" (2015), and Illumination Entertainment's *The Secret Life of Pets* (2016) that help to explicate the heavily analytical high-theories of institutionally recognized ecocritics Henry David Thoreau, Jacque Derrida, and Jane Bennett, among others.

By way of approaching the complex genealogy in which humans "left behind" our "nature," Halberstam turns first to the lasting globalized effects of colonialism. In the first section of his *Wild Things*, Halberstam tracks the emergence of categorical "unnaturalness" of racially and sexually marginalized bodies in colonial contexts, using Michael Taussig's analysis of *Heart of Darkness*, Irish diplomat Roger Casement's *Black Diaries*, and Swampy Cree artist Kent Monkman's paintings to illuminate how "going wild might well propel us into another realm of thought, action, being, and knowing" that defies colonial progress towards a civilized hegemony (42). Reading aesthetics of bewilderment as queer in addition to anticolonial, Halberstam draws on Timothy Morton's concept of "unfathomable intimacies" (80-81) and Dianne Chisolm's "biophilia" (79) to develop a central *epistemology of the ferox* in which our intimacies

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with or fantasies of animals provide an "approximate language" with "grammars available for expression of love, desire, and sex" that exceed and disarticulate the category of human and translate us back to nature (79). The second section of his book continues in similar aims, alternatively taking up the biocentric mind-frames of an archetypal wild child that resists the white and heterosexual norms of our "civilized world" *and* the imagined zombified psychologies of domesticated animals that challenge perceived contemporary companionate relationships. With a bargainer's hope, Halberstam ends his book by musing on the ways in which those animals who threaten to become "feral again and rise up against the human" (161) remind us marginalized bodies of our always lurking and defiant wildness.

A key chapter making grounds in advancing the broader field of queer theory is the third, "Epistemology of the Ferox," a must-read for those ecocritical queer scholars attempting to analyze our genealogies in the Anthropocene. As an aptly studied queer theorist might already ascertain, Halberstam takes aims in this chapter to provide expansions onto seminal work by foundational queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). This return to Sedgwick is not a new act. Where Halberstam stands out, however, is in his strategic use of queer ecocritics such as Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erikson *and* eco-enmeshed 20th century writers such as T. H. White and J. A. Baker to articulate an epistemology of the ferox, wherein "we leave the strictures, indeed the internal confines, of the home and enter a larger world" across which "an unknowable self is dispersed" (10). At the crux of Sedgwick's epistemology of the closet is a recognition that crucial indices of knowledge production in Western culture—such as masculine/feminine, natural/artificial, and innocence/initiation—are perpetually marked by the widespread and "suffusing stain of the homo/heterosexual crisis" (Sedgwick 1990, 72). Rather than an *unspeakable* ignorance of homosexuality, contemporary indices of knowledge for Halberstam are always caught within an *unknowable* and forgotten wilderness, or within "entire systems of knowing, signifying, and desiring that simply exceed the human" in our contemporary form (82). By trading the weighty epistemological space of the closet in Sedgwick for an ecologically engaged purview, Halberstam intrigues queer critics to revisit "the an/archives of desire" to find those "forms of love, affection, being and knowing, feeling, making, intuiting, lusting, marking, and enjoying [that] gave way, slowly and incompletely, under the sway of new definitional closure" to our anthropocentric existences (108-109).

Anticipating critique against the racially charged epistemological term "wild" as framing mechanism for oft-whitewashed queer desire, Halberstam is clear to repeatedly air an awareness of the colonial legacy of his terminology (46; 49; 123). By way of ameliorating obvious problematics, Halberstam draws from a large number of Black thinkers and theorists including Frank Wilderson and Saidiya Hartman. What is lacking, however, is proper homage to Indigenous theory and thought, a major locus of debate around contemporary uses of terms like "wild" that connote primitivism. While Halberstam appears to draw on Jodi Byrd as a token Indigenous voice in articulating wildness and bewilderment as decolonial strategies and appropriates a pan-Indigenous "trickster" to organize two-spirit Kent Monkman's "disorderly" aesthetic, such a limited scope belies disengagement with Indigenous thought and theory—indeed, Drew Hayden Taylor (1996) famously reads "trickster" as a red flag in ethnocentric analyses (88). With a growing number of Indigenous biocentric ways-of-being amalgamated into academic vocabulary (cf. King 1992; Kimmerer 2013; Justice 2018), "wild," "feral," and "ferox" as analytic devices to understand Indigenous aesthetics can only be read as ill-informed. Despite progressive aims to unmake a colonial world through bewilderment, Halberstam clearly runs into problems when treating his new epistemology as totalizing or tautology. It is perhaps imperative to note in ending how an original book-proof provided by Nambe Pueblo scholar Debbie Reese (2018) illustrates how Sendak, the originating trace in Halberstam's rhetorical genealogy, reads appropriated and stereotyped Indigenous garb as inspiration for child-like animacies in *Where the Wild Things Are* (see Figure 1).

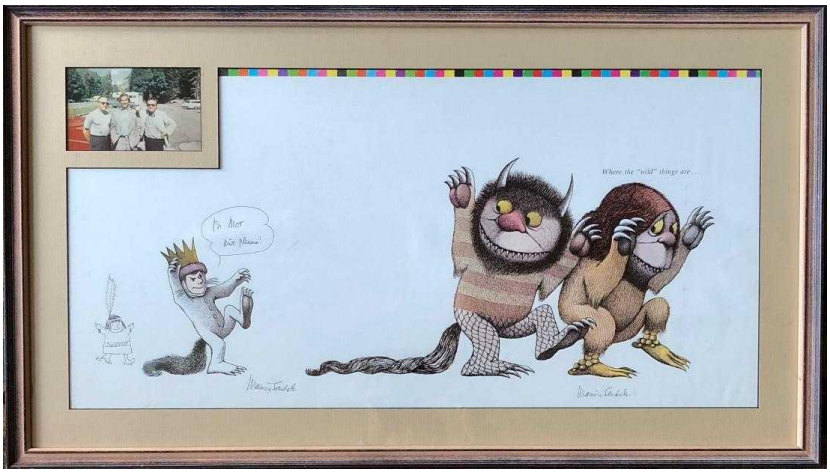

Figure 1: Book-Proof of Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* with Ink Drawing of pan-Indigenous Stereotype.

Sailing, then, by way of conclusion, back over years, in and out of weeks, and into the night and *Where the Wild Things Are*, I want to underscore the complexities and intricacies inherent in Halberstam's theorizations. Maurice Sendak's writings occupy a special place in mine, my father's, and Halberstam's thought processes; and because of its low-theory prominences, the familiar children's book helps to articulate alternative modes of worlding and of queer epistemologies beyond the hetero/homo closet. Still, contemporary critics must be mindful of the ways in which the constructions of a queered wild run in deep-seated racial oppressions. This critique is not to devalue Halberstam's work. Indeed, bewilderment as an ecocritical reaction to our ecosystems expands existing theorizations on vibrant ecologies and emboldens marginalized existence within an essentialist ferox mind. There is, additionally, very promising work to be done in drawing out queer histories with these alternative feral epistemologies. But no theory should be totalizing or tautologizing, and commentary on Indigenous art and history should always demonstrate practiced awareness of ongoing Indigenous thought and discussion. "Wild" as a framing mechanism is rife with explicit and implicit racial biases—as Halberstam is well aware—but a wild rumpus in appropriate contexts has potential to shift our dependent presents, destruct(ure) our uninhabitable hegemonies.

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