Normality's Fear: *A Broken System*

Normality. What is it? The term fosters ideas of commonality, usualness, and uniformity. It prohibits concepts of irregularity and uncertainty; it *fears* anything that deviates from what we recurrently see and know in life. In many ways, Stacey Waite, author of *Love Poem to Androgyny*, challenges the mainstream views of normality through her very existence in the world. Waite contradicts my own perception of normality; she complicates my fragile, almost naïve conceptions of gender. In everyday conversation, the word "normal" gets lightly tossed around, and circulates presumably as a universally understood concept. Yet, if I were asked what it means to be "normal," I would be at a loss of a definitive answer. How does one know what is considered "normal"? Where do the social characterizations of normality come from? Judith Halberstam, author of "An Introduction to Female Masculinity: Masculinity without Men," tackles these notions of normality, and how its concepts apply to studies of race, gender, and more specifically, the tangle of masculinity within these terms. Social perceptions of these concepts have been inscribed in our minds, pushing us to see things from the constructs of our own experiences. Both authors, however, invite us to think beyond our notions of the norm; they challenge us to recognize, and promote legitimacy in entities we may be unfamiliar with. And, despite its many uncertainties and apprehensions, I, for one, accept their challenge.

Our society runs on a strict set of gender laws centered on denotations of normality. We abide by this system because without it, we would be faced with uncertainties. Stacey Waite discusses this in her poem, "XY," when she creates a persona that embodies the society's need for gendered expectations. Waite writes:

> The doctor is careful with me, knowing how my being XY
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> makes me a bad example of a woman…
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> . . . .
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> . . . .
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> The doctor looks mostly at his chart, he wants me to disappear,
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> to put back, in order, his faith in the system of things.
>
> He wants me to react correctly, to be ashamed. (Waite 30)

Waite conveys the discomforts of society through the actions of the doctor. When she states that he wants things to be "put back, in order," to restore his "faith in the system of things," Waite suggests that there is a gender construct system that society has learned to follow. She uses phrases like "bad example," and "react correctly" to further imply the prototypical model that people are expected to adhere to. The doctor expresses his uneasiness when faced with Waite's conflicting gender, exemplifying society's common belief that all people fit into only one of the two categories as either "male" or "female." The society depends on this binary model; it creates "order" and allows us to structurally understand our world of gender.

This system divides our constructs into groups; it pushes us to categorize what we see. And when we place people in these categories of "male" and "female," we begin to believe that we can make predictions on their likes and dislikes, on their actions, beliefs, and even on who they love. We believe that we can make predictions on their whole being. Waite discusses these

gender characterizations in her poem, "Kimberly." She writes how she should have been named Kimberly, and states:

> I might have made better decisions about my hair
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> or done more sit-ups. I might have drawn
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> something more appropriate for the refrigerator door.
>
> I might have practiced spelling my name over and over again in cursive.
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> After all, I would have felt some loyalty to a name like that. (11)

Waite uses phrases like "better decisions" and "more appropriate" to describe some actions that she could have taken to be more like a woman. Her list suggests that there are certain expectations of women that are considered acceptable, or correct – and I will admit, this list is far from foreign to me. Waite employs the girly name Kimberly, and creates yet another persona that embodies the familiar constructs held by society. Entities like hair (looks), sit-ups (body), and cursive (femininity) are all commonly associated with females, and have been embedded within the build of Kimberly. Her use of the word "loyalty," paired with the female name "Kimberly" implies society's faithfulness to becoming this feminine female arrangement.

So if our binary constructs tell us that femininity looks female, then does that mean that masculinity must look male? Judith Halberstam explores this topic in depth, and questions why masculinity often "reduce[s] down to the male body and its effects" (Halberstam 355). I suppose I had fallen into the ploys of society, as in my mind, I had always acknowledged femininity as belonging to females, and masculinity as belonging to males. Halberstam, however, investigates the realm of masculinity in the male body, and examines society's typical images of masculinity. Halberstam states how "arguments of excessive masculinity tend to focus on black bodies (male and female), latino/a bodies, or working class bodies, and insufficient masculinity is all too often

figured by Asian bodies or upper class bodies" (356). By using the words "excessive" and "insufficient," she seems to compare the masculinities of those racial groups to a mainstream or "perfect" image of masculinity. The attribution to minority races as having "excessive" and "insufficient" masculinities lets Halberstam reach a consensus that "masculinity becomes dominant in the sphere of white middle-class maleness" (356). This image, as I can imagine, contains a tall white male; he is muscular and strong, and encompasses the typical attributes that society has given to males. As Waite discussed in her visit with us, the "normal" male does not cry or show emotions – even at his own father's funeral – as he is supposed to be an emblem of strength, power, and security (Waite Lecture). However, are these gender stereotypes and expectations in the system correct, or do they create constructs that are too narrow and confined? Do they *really* allow us to better understand another, or do they act as false guides?

Maybe my own experiences as a victim of false stereotyping makes it difficult for me to accept the merits of classifications as enough justification to maintain these constructs. Yes, these classifications do give us a sense of certainty – a sense of normality. They allow us to create guides on how to react to various stimuli, and perhaps, this is why we are so inclined to hold on to them. However, the words that we use for these categorizations are packed with so much meaning beyond its original intent. When one comments on another's gender, he or she is hardly ever speaking about his or her genitalia or reproductive organs. Rather, he or she is commenting on the societal expectations of how one is supposed to be, or act, as a member of that classification title. Similarly, racial labels are far from the pure description of ethnic composition. Ethnic labels are tied with cultural stereotypes, and stir about our lives as a coupled pair. They have become engrained lenses through which we see the world and its people. Frequently, Asians are perceived as nerdy, socially awkward, and overly concerned with school.

My peers projected these negative stereotypes upon me, which made me ashamed to be Asian. It became difficult for me to feel comfortable labeling myself as "Asian" because of the multitude of expectations that came with the word, and thus, I tried very hard to be the opposite of what these stereotypes spoke of. Quite honestly, I began to take a hidden pride in myself when people referred to me as a "normal Asian."

Now wait – a "normal Asian"? What does that actually mean? It took me nearly seventeen years to finally begin to question, and take slight offense to, a set of words that used to give me so much pleasure and satisfaction. When deconstructing the roots of the word "normal," as paired with the many racial labels, I realize that the referral to the term is marked by underlying thoughts of a racially white image. If combining the word "normal" with the negative impression of a minority racial type deems such a new, positive response, does that mean that in our culture, the dominant and "normal" race to be is white?

Whether we are aware of it or not, everyone has "downloaded" sets of cultural cues that shape the way we see the world around us (Halberstam Lecture). These social cues are molded into categories, and serve as sets of characterizations that are associated with different labels. In my mind, I had acknowledged the "white" race to be normality; I had believed that there was one "correct" way to be. Like many others, I had wanted to fit in with what society would praise, and consider to be "normal." Yet, ethnic labeling has proven to be a dysfunctional and threatening progression, one that has resulted in an unspoken social hierarchy, and the inaccurate judgments of others. It is precisely through this experience that allows me to view other sets of gender classifications, like gender typing, as such a danger to our society today.

Stacey Waite exemplifies the perils of gender classifications in her poem, "In the Womb." She writes:

> This is before I knew
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> the names of things, before
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> the placenta's song faded out
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> in the afterbirth… (Waite 9)

Waite's repetition of the word "before," and the use of the word "after(birth)" express a contrast of time. Waite indicates that before birth, one is unaware of the names, labels, and their paired expectations. The tone of her poem suggests that this period may be better; it implies a time in which people are not judging others through avid labeling. Moreover, Waite uses the unique phrase "placenta's song." The placenta is essential for a fetus to survive, and is the part of the womb that provides nutrients. This elicits thoughts of nurture, and unconditional providence. Further, because Waite uses the word "song," my senses are sparked, and I begin to actually hear a song in my mind that is soft and calming. This imagery amplifies the words on the page, as I can imagine hearing the song fade as the scenery transforms from a protected and tranquil internal environment, to a harsh and vicious external environment. Waite's imagery parallels her later statements in "The Villagers," concerning the "violent pronouns [that] reach out from the alleyways" (32). Waite's use of the word "violent" illustrates the aggression that sometimes occurs when people face others who are gender ambiguous. People fear what seems unfamiliar or different because they do not have the constructs in their own mind to guide them on how to deal with it.

When people encounter these variances, they face what Waite calls, in her poem "Fixing my Voice," "gender indigestion" (36). Is that a woman? Is that a man? We cannot "digest" what we see; we are unable to take this person, and put them in our feeble "male" and "female" categories. Our gendered world, as Halberstam reminds us, then falls into a dilemma, since there

is a "distance between the binary gender schema and lived multiple gendered experiences" (Halberstam 367). There becomes, as there is in many things, a conflict between what we ideally want (a clear-cut system) and what we see in reality (variances within that system). Halberstam exemplifies this conflict through the arguments of Paul Smith, editor of the anthology *Boys: Masculinities in Contemporary Culture*. She states how Smith "suggests that masculinity must always be thought of 'in the plural' as masculinities 'defined and cut through by differences and contradictions of all sorts'" (362). Smith's proposal of "in the plural" seems to parallel the multiplicity of gendered experiences we see in life. He appears to want to expand the idea of masculinity, to want to advocate that masculinity should not be seen as just one type, but instead, as a multitude of different kinds. It is as if Smith would want these "differences and contradictions" to be accepted as variances of equal masculinities. However, as Halberstam notes, to Smith, the plurality of masculinity "encompasses a dominant white masculinity that is crisscrossed by its others, gays, bisexual, black, Asian, and Latino masculinities" (362). This statement suggests a hierarchy of masculinities, with white masculinity at the top, and its "others" trickling below. Smith's interpretation of plurality of masculinity reinforces only one brand of people as being normality, implying the irregularity of masculinities outside the prototype. While he attempts to expand the boundaries of masculinity by suggesting the need for plurality, his attributions do not allow for further expansion of the term because he still permits one type to be dominant over the others. Smith revolves back to the "system," exemplifying the lack of ability for society to move past the need for order, even when it does not work.

What do we do, then, when we are faced with this conflict? We are reluctant to let go of our binary gender system, yet there are so many examples that one by one prove its faults. As a masculine female, Halberstam finds it difficult to find a place of belonging within the binary

gender classifications of "male" and "female." Halberstam lacks the familiar identification with the gender option "female," yet does not want to give way to how masculinity must mean the gender option "male." Perhaps I have never thought of the binary system as much of a concern because I had always told myself: go back to biology. Male is XY and has a penis; female is XX, and has a vagina – we had learned this from such a young age. Yet, here we are again, faced with another contradiction, as Stacey Waite's very existence has shown us. Biology has, in some ways, failed us, and we hit the gray area between our binary constructs. The fact that there are a multitude of people who fall in this gray area leads Halberstam to ask why we "do not have multiple gender options, multiple gender categories, and real-life nonmale and nonfemale options for embodiment and identification" (365). She asks why we "settle for the paucity of classification when it comes to gender" (370). However, I am reluctant to resort to the creation of new gendered labels, as new terminology only seems to actualize more differences, and accomplishes very little when trying to lessen the distinction between male and female. As Halberstam recognizes, naming "confers, rather than reflects, meaning" (369). Conferment of meaning gives a more concrete value of meaning; it results in a pre-packaged gift of terms associated with that name. Yet, without naming, a reflection of meaning would permit one to ponder; it would allow one to actually think about whom the other is, not just make assumptions through labeling.

Perhaps then, the concept of naming itself – whether it is "male" or "female," "Asian" or "white" – can, in some way, lead to inaccurate judgments of everyone. Something that struck me during our discussion with Stacey Waite was this bold claim: gender doesn't work – for anyone (Waite Lecture). I had always thought the gender system worked for me though – I embodied much of what society had expected of me in terms of my gender identity. Yet, when I

truly think about it, do I embody these characteristics because I want to, or because that is what society expects of me? Do I love pink because I truly love that specific hue of color, or is that what society tells me to love? Do I care about the way I dress, or what I eat, because I *actually* care, or is it because society tells me to?

If the flaws of the gender system affect us all, then why has it not been changed? What is the overarching solution to this problem? I am reluctant to admit that, after all my explorations, my answer to this question is still: I do not know. But while I cannot articulate a grand solution to this issue, I do propose that everyone take on the challenge that both Halberstam and Waite propound. In life, we express animosity towards things in which we do not know how to otherwise react. We fear what we have never encountered, what we have never experienced; we fear, really, what is outside of normality. Yet, with education, these issues become in our awareness. And as we begin to notice them more frequently in our everyday lives – a gender difference here, and a variation there – they become less bizarre in our minds, and we grow to develop the constructs to accept them. I suppose it is not a single, all-powering, revolution that we strive for, but rather, to leave an imprint of these issues in one person's life, to the next person's life, until this realm of gender disputes hopefully becomes just a problem of the past.

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