

# The Trouble With Going Gaga

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J. Jack Halberstam. *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*. Beacon Press, 2012. 178 pp.

“Who is Lady Gaga?” asks J. Jack Halberstam in the preface to *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*; “What do her performances mean? And more importantly, what do her gender theatrics have to say to young people about identity, politics, and celebrity?” (xii). These are intriguing questions, especially for those of us who have been spellbound—even fleetingly—by Lady Gaga’s provocative music videos, adamantine earworms, and audacious live performances (recall, for example, the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards when she concluded “Paparazzi” by staging her own blood-soaked death). Indeed, the pop star’s shapeshifting persona, flirtations with genderfuck, embrace of the monstrous, meteoric rise to and self-conscious lust for fame, and creative play with pop culture pastiche in videos like “Telephone” all invite—even beg for—theorization and interpretation. So it is unsurprising that there exists a growing company of scholars (Gagaists?) who approach Lady Gaga through an academic lens as part of projects that also aspire, fittingly, to the popular. For example: *Gaga Stigmata*, founded in 2010, is an online journal that responds to the pop star’s work from a range of interdisciplinary perspectives; Richard J. Gray edited a collection of critical essays entitled *The Performance Identities of Lady Gaga* in 2012; and when a University of South Carolina professor announced he was teaching a sociology class on Lady Gaga, it made international news.<sup>1</sup>

In short, Lady Gaga has proven herself a juicy enough subject for multiple academic tomes, and Halberstam, well known in queer theory and gender studies circles—especially for *Female Masculinity* (1998) and *In a Queer Place and Time* (2005)—seems an ideal candidate for the first single-author academic-ish monograph on this generation’s Queen of Pop. However, readers should not be misled by the title of Halberstam’s book, or the Gaga-inspired cover art, or the fact that “Gaga” appears in the title of all five of the book’s chapters: the pointed questions posed in the preface remain, for the most part, unanswered. For herein lies the rub: this isn’t entirely a book about Lady Gaga. At least, this isn’t a book that attends to Lady Gaga as one might expect given the main title, cover art, and chapter titles, all of which suggest a sustained

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<sup>1</sup> The class was “Lady Gaga and the Sociology of Fame”, taught by Mathieu Deflem. For more, see “Lady Gaga course coming to U.S. university.”

focus on the Lady herself. This is a kind of Queer Theory 101, an introduction to contemporary thought on gender and sexuality for a popular audience, a not-too-distant cousin of Michael Warner's now-canonical *The Trouble With Normal*. This cousin, however, just happens to be a big Gaga fan.

All this is not to say that *Gaga Feminism* isn't useful or interesting or lively or a "fun, user-friendly, and quasi-academic handbook" for "going gaga," as per Halberstam's description (xxv). It is indeed all of these things, and the book succeeds in its ambitious primary objectives: to accessibly render some significant questions and ideas springing from contemporary feminist and queer theory; to destabilize our conception of the "normal" when it comes to sex, sexuality, and gender; to invite us to imagine a more fluid approach to these ostensibly fixed facets of our selves; and to critique the institutions (i.e. marriage) that so rigidly define our relationships with one another. But Halberstam's coining and elucidation of "gaga feminism", which she describes as "the feminism (pheminism?) of the phony, the unreal, and speculative" and posits as a strategy for subversion and disruption, is not accomplished through in-depth readings of Gaga's songs, videos, or performances (xii). "To be clear," Halberstam writes, "what I am calling 'gaga' here certainly derives from Lady Gaga and has everything to do with Lady Gaga but is not limited to Lady Gaga" (xii). There are a few references to Gaga and a three-page reading of her "Telephone" video at the end of Halberstam's 33-page second chapter, but the emphasis in the book is definitely on that which is contained in the "not limited to."

One of the book's many successes and pleasures, however, is Halberstam's weaving together in lucid and engaging prose an enormous amount of material, both popular and academic-theoretical, for the purpose of diagnosing the current neoliberal, homo/heternormative state of affairs when it comes to representations of gender and sexuality, and, under the banner of gaga feminism, subverting the status quo. Readers navigate autobiographical anecdotes about Halberstam's own experience of gender (described in one moment as "boygirl," a term coined by his partner's children); theory encompassing Shulamith Firestone's Marxist feminism, sexual anthropologist Gayle Rubin's studies on kinship, and Judith Levine's work on childhood sexuality; and readings of films too great in number to list here. Halberstam takes particular issue with the "mumblecore" film genre, which pairs underachieving men with bright and ambitious women, and finds animated children's television and film to be a rich source of queer potential. In readings abbreviated from her other recent book, 2011's *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam locates queer permutations of the family in *Finding Nemo* and *The Fantastic Mr. Fox*, and reads SpongeBob SquarePants as an example of "ambiguous embodiment" in children's TV/cinema, "an animated mythological universe populated by characters with eccentric and often simply weird relations to gender" (xix).

Unexpectedly, children figure prominently throughout *Gaga Feminism*, bringing to mind recent work on the figure of the child and the queerness of children by Natasha Hurley and Steven Bruhm, Lee Edelman, and Kathryn Bond Stockton. In a move that echoes Edelman's *No Future* in its opposition to the political imaginary's figural child, Halberstam "acknowledge[s] that the child has all too often served as a justification for the most wretched forms of social and political conservatism in the United States since at least the mid-nineteenth century" (xx). Yet, Halberstam's own position on the child seems more in line with Hurley, Bruhm, and Stockton, all of whom are less interested in positioning the child in opposition to queerness, arguing instead that queerness is at the very core of children and childhood. For Halberstam, children have a relationship to language and signification that is far more fluid and creative than adults, and so he suggests that "adults should [...] pick up terms, words, lexicons from children who, in many ways, live the world differently than we do, live it more closely, live it more intensely, and, sometimes, live it more critically" (xxv). This element of childishness is crucial to the part of gaga feminism that seeks to re-configure sex and gender through play, since "gaga" is, after all, "a child word, a word that stands in for whatever the child cannot pronounce" (Halberstam xxv).

Childishness, however, strikes me as the only characteristic that could distinguish the ostensible work of gaga feminism from that of queer theory. It is unclear, in other words, how gaga feminism is distinct from some critical concepts and questions that have been circulating, at least among queer theorists and activists, for some time now. Throughout his book, Halberstam tells us again and again what gaga feminism "is", and although an element of ambiguity seems important to the concept, each rehearsal of the definition further obscures its significance. Three examples: "Gaga feminism proposes that we look more closely at heterosexuality, not simply to blame it for the continued imbalance of the sexes but to find in its collapse new modes of intimate relation" (22). Again: "Gaga feminism will be a way of seeing new realities that shadow our everyday lives – gaga feminists will see multiple genders, finding male/female dichotomies to be outdated and illogical" (26). And later:

[G]aga feminism proposes to be a new kind of gender politics for a new generation, a generation less bound to the romance of permanence (in the form of marriage, for example), more committed to the potential of flexibility (in the form of desire, for example), more turned in to the fixity of power relations (in the form of capitalism), and less likely to buy the broken ideologies of uniqueness, American dreams, inclusivity, and respectability. (148)

Many of gaga feminism's future-oriented promises have already been realized by other theorists. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick closely scrutinized heterosexuality, locating homosexuality at its very core, and challenged permanence through her idea that nonce

taxonomies constitute and re-constitute our sexual selves over time; Michel Foucault used homosexuality as a model for the multiplication of relational modes while tracing its definitional emergence through structures of power; Judith Butler problematized the binary structures that buttress categories of sex and gender. Furthermore, Halberstam's third and fourth chapters, "Gaga Sexualities: The End of Normal" and "Gaga Relations: The End of Marriage", respectively, have much in common with the aforementioned *The Trouble With Normal*. Both texts aim to problematize the idea of "normal" relationships and sexual modalities through a queer critique of the institution of marriage. Both texts also argue for a more imaginative approach to relationality. Warner proposes shame as "the premise of the special kind of sociability that holds queer culture together"; "[queer] scenes", he writes, "are the true *salons des refusés*, where the most heterogeneous people are brought into great intimacy by their common experience of being despised and rejected in a world of norms that they now recognize as false morality" (35-36). Similarly, Halberstam pursues "alternative intimacies", which "stretch connections between people and across neighbourhoods like invisible webs, and [...] bind us to one another in ways that foster communication, responsibility, and generosity" (110-111). As a groundbreaking queer thinker herself, Halberstam is undoubtedly aware of the lineage to which her work is indebted, so the newness she attributes to gaga feminism is curious.

Halberstam's articulation of gaga feminism is further obscured by its uneasy and ambivalent relationship to, well, feminism. "Obviously any movement that calls itself 'feminist' must assume some privileged relation to the category of 'woman'," Halberstam writes, "and gaga feminism is not different in that respect" (26). A mere three pages later, however, he claims: "This feminism is not about sisterhood, motherhood, sorority, or even women" (29). And later in the book: "Gaga feminism is, above all, concerned with reconfiguring the meaning of sex and gender in ways that may favour heterosexual women in particular" (82). Gaga feminism's relationship to "woman" remains unclear throughout: is Halberstam invested in moments of strategic essentialism, or does she want to do away with this sedimented category of gender? Again, it may be that paradox and contradiction are fundamental to gaga feminism, but these inconsistencies in Halberstam's account of the concept are more confusing than theoretically interesting.

Overall, it would have been great to see more detailed readings of Lady Gaga herself—her costumes, live performances, videos—that illustrate how exactly she is the figure at the centre of gaga feminism, and how she both embodies and contradicts what Halberstam considers to be its core principles of subversion, childishness, and radical reimagination. Or, conversely, *Gaga Feminism* could have been retitled and billed as a successor to *The Trouble With Normal*, one that moves with impressive speed through a variety of popular culture texts to diagnose the persistence of heteronormativity and

our limited relational imaginary, while illustrating how feminism and queer theory have so profoundly shaped, and have the potential to continue shaping our relationships to gender, sexuality, and one another. As it stands, the trouble with “going gaga” is the fact that we don’t really require Gaga in order to do so.

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