

## **History, Theory and Practice in J. Jack Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal***

By Lauren Specht, Colorado State University - Pueblo, United States

1 With a general audience of the non-academic public and a specific audience of feminists in mind, the author presents the overall book as an opportunity to embrace a new and radical type of feminism called “Gaga feminism.” Halberstam uses popular culture, mass media, and the consumer capitalist entertainment culture of America to demonstrate where Gaga feminism fits into the heterosexual culture of a changing but as yet unchanged gender scheme, why feminist and queer theory needs to consider the radical feminism as a possible solution, how Gaga feminism can help re-define or eliminate the concept of normal, the ways in which Gaga feminism can inform our national presumptions about marriage and the “natural,” and the recommendations and practices that someone can try when embracing Gaga feminism. Though he may not intentionally do so, Halberstam tends to develop the following three processes of support for Gaga feminism (not in any particular order in the book): foundational development, theoretical musings, and practical application.

2 Because this book is created for beginners—whether that means the beginner of Gaga feminism or the beginner of feminism in general—Halberstam makes an effort to address the foundational thinkers and texts of feminism from which this idea stems. *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* is situated directly among works of modern, postcapitalist writers like Judith Levine, who argues that the control of children’s sexuality results in dire consequences (14). More indirectly, *Gaga Feminism* is situated among a wide array of seminal theorists like Foucault and Marx. Readers find Halberstam in conversation with such writers as *Atlantic* reporter Hanna Rosin, among others, who argues that there is a great “role reversal,” where women work and men become obsolete. Halberstam finds that Rosin's work is lacking this specific “gaga” elements, as she did not follow up the implications of her claims. Halberstam’s Gaga feminism is also situated in direct opposition to authors like Susan Faludi, who openly disagreed with Halberstam’s claims for Gaga feminism after a conference and whose work, though considered fundamentally feminist, is not in line with most of the postcapitalist gender and sexuality changes that Halberstam would like to see feminism—Gaga feminism, to be

precise—embrace. Because his focus is not singularly academic, though, and the author incorporates a good deal of media-related cultural artifacts into his analyses, he is careful to include a wide variety of examples from multiple different genres.

3 Halberstam begins his overview of media related gendering by looking at examples of gendered relationships from children's television shows like *Spongebob Squarepants*, of which Halberstam claims, "SpongeBob SquarePants and his crew of spongy life forms all experience a soft relation to reality, and (...) life (...) operates according to its own set of rules, code violations, morality, and propriety" (xviii). This claim reinforces Halberstam's idea that the media contributes to our understanding of gendering or, in some cases, lack thereof from an early age. The book also analyzes the way mainstream media models like Lady Gaga, Lil' Kim, Rihanna, Nicki Minaj, Jenni Rivera, and Ke\$ha portray feminism, and gender, in different ways than society expects. Also contributing to the development of gender in media and the need for Gaga feminism is the analysis of examples of mainstream and alternative—also known as mumblecore—films like *Baby Mama* and *The Kids Are All Right*. All of these analyses of academic arguments and social portrayals of gender and sex contribute to a better understanding of the world into which Gaga feminism will enter, should it be put into practice by feminists anywhere, giving readers a better conceptualization of the foundation upon which the theory of Gaga feminism is built.

4 Halberstam acquaints his audience with the theory surrounding Gaga feminism and its general category, feminism, in several ways. The book spurs readers to understand why reading about and understanding Gaga feminism is important in any way on page xx of the introduction, saying that "[change] should *interest* us (...) and should engage us enough to spur a reconsideration of the terms, the names, the categories we use to understand our bodies," continuing by saying that we should care about the way change affects "our relationships, our bond with others, our connections to strangers, our intimacies within and beyond biological relation, and our imagination about the future" (emphasis original). By also analyzing several real instances of relationships, like heterosexual role reversal and male pregnancies, gender politics, and sex, Halberstam creates a relatable framework by which the audience may understand feminist theory and its faults that call for a theory like Gaga feminism, as well as to understand the ways in which Gaga feminism helps to break down societal expectations of

relationships and gender in a productive manner. Similarly to the author's development of the foundational basis of Gaga feminism, his analysis of Gaga feminism helps the audience, most of whom are expected to be non-academic readers, understand how Gaga feminism works, at least theoretically. To completely pose Gaga feminism as a viable option for would-be feminists, Halberstam's next step is to introduce possible practical applications for Gaga feminism.

5 The practical application for Gaga feminism is found in *Gaga Feminism* most often in the form of recommendations. For those new to Gaga feminism, these nudges are critical to developing a more versatile impression of what it is. In the preface, the author provides a vaguely worded recommendation for subscribers to Gaga feminism, which, he says, "hints at a future rather than prescribing one; it opens out onto possibilities rather than naming them; it gestures toward new forms of revolt rather than patenting them" (xiii). This recommendation is that Gaga feminism be treated as revolutionary and constantly changing rather than well-theorized, but static. Halberstam encourages readers to look toward models of popular culture who refuse to be categorized by culture and normality and, as he puts it in the manifesto chapter of the book, "do agitate, do make things worse, do run screaming through the street, and do refuse to return to business as usual" (132).

6 While much of what the author discusses proposes plausible and acceptable background, theory, and practice, the means by which he argues for Gaga feminism experiences the same limitations of binary that his text argues against. In some ways, the author's presentation of normal gendered structures, or normalized societal structures, as the bad that exists in society and of the currently abnormal—the other—as the good to which society must aspire is similar to the broken heterosexual structures critiqued by Halberstam throughout much of chapter three. However, Halberstam's theory of Gaga feminism does not present the feminism as anything that has been thoroughly understood by anyone, including Halberstam himself, which is why a more fitting style is not to be expected and the comparative writing style in which tension develops the concepts most fully is often still the most effective.

7 Though *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal* is not likely the next feminist foundational text due to its radical and very new introduction into the American world of feminism, the text is certainly useful in accessing the less scholarly audiences for whom it is written and activating questions and responses among most open-minded individuals who also

enjoy taking part in to the entertainment industry. Fortunately, the book is also quite well constructed for this particular audience by not only theorizing media relations with the general public, but also by presenting the names and corresponding theories of those who are scholars in the area of feminism and, even, Gaga-related feminism.