

Daniela Jauk

## Gaga-feminist Teaching<sup>1</sup>



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The following few pages were intended to be a brief book review of J. Jack Halberstam's *Gaga feminism: Sex, gender, and the end of normal* (2012). While it probably could still pass as such (albeit not a timely one), I realized that the smart little book is particularly inspiring for *teaching* sex, genders, and sexualities, thus I focus on some of the lessons I take away for my queer\_feminist teaching practise in and beyond acadmia. I am writing this as a person who holds a PhD in sociology and was prepared to be a college teacher through the professional socialization machine that is grad school. As grad students we are often forced to teach, yet often vastly underprepared and under-supported to do this job. I still feel like an insufficient „teacher“ at times, and would not consider myself particularly passionate about the learning environments that are created at universities as I came to know them in Austria and the US. Jack Halberstam is a child of the same acadmic environment, and with this accessible text he inspires us to „go gaga“ as gendered sexual persons, as acadmics, and as teachers.

In the first chapter Halberstam lays out the characteristics of Gaga feminism as he2 sees it. Lady Gaga's performances and work become a metaphor for a new proclaimed feminism that is „about unbecoming a woman, undoing the category, to „take it apart like a car engine and then rebuild it, so that it is louder and faster.“ (p. ivx). Lady Gaga performs new feminities in her Warholesque love for attention, but Halberstam suggests that ultimately being gaga is being phony, utilizing gender performances as a playing field and social experimentation. This feminism or „pheminism“ of the phony signifies a gender politics for a new generation, that loudly refuses the categories that have been assigned to them. „Gaga feminism is a politics that brings together meditations on fame and visibility with a lashing critique of the fixity of roles for males and females. It is a scavenger

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<sup>2</sup> This is the first book of Halberstam's that appears under the name Jack instead of Judith. I thus refer to the author with male pronouns. He also shares that his partner's kids are more comfortable with a male pronoun for him and call him „stepdad.“

feminism that borrows promiscuously, steals from everywhere, and inhabits the ground of stereotype and cliché all at the same time“ (p. 5).

Particularly in the beginning and the end of the book Halberstam makes it clear that he is inspired by social movements of the 21st century and accordingly Gaga feminism is a way to translate new methods of social changemakers to gender relations, to „occupy gender.“ Gaga feminism is hereby not stuck on a discursive level (a limitation of much queer theory pointed out frequently and with a passion by sociologists). It has structural implications: „The gaga feminist, in other words, cannot settle into the house that the culture has built for her. S/he has to tear it down, reimagine the very meaning of the house in form and function and only then can s/he rebuild.“ (p. xiv). Gaga feminism is thus also a lens through which we see how much energy we have already put into reimagining our worlds and creating non-normative intimacies, families, and futures and how to build on that. It could be an anti-depressant and uplift in the tides of anti-feminist backlash, neoliberalist re-traditionalization, and masculist lobbywork in Austria and elsewhere in the world.

Halberstam advocates a „childcentric“ approach to gender and feminism that dares to disrupt and explore. He draws from his own experience as he was introduced to his partner’s kids when they were little and *gender* was not yet a closed binary category to them. They were three and five and upon trying to decide if Halberstam was a „boy“ or a „girl“, they came up with the category „boygirl.“ Children are all too often a justification for social and political conservatism and outright censorship. According to Halberstam the excessive training we give to boys and girls turns them from „anarchic, ungendered blobs into gender automatons,“ which is dangerous, unnecessary, and also unrealistic. Halberstam turns it around and emphasizes the anarchic and „gaga“ potential of a pre-socialized and pre-disciplined child. He also advocates to stop denying and policing children’s sexuality and disrupt the transmission of moralistic and inadequate narratives of sex, love, and marriage.

The core three chapters are case studies in which Halberstam applies a gaga feminist lens to genders, sexualities, and (gay) marriage. It is in particular monogamous hetero-inspired marriage arrangements that Halberstam attacks. He unmasks traditional conceptions of parenthood even in seemingly queer constellations such as pregnant men or women having babies without men using a biotechnological path. He agitates against gay marriage. The reactive, weak politics of inclusion maintain the status quo, he argues, and rights should not be marriage dependent. Alternative intimacies are not served by the oppressive ideology of the marriage model; instead, new models that extend benefits to any other person, independent of kinship status, should be developed. „Gaga politics“ is „less oriented towards legal inclusion and more oriented to a queer project of reimagining life worlds“ (p. 125).

It is not only here that the reader clearly recognizes a US and a biographical bias. It flares up particularly when it comes to lesbian parents that are variably gendered, as represented by Halberstam himself. He considers butch dads the quiet revolution heralding a new gaga feminist component to the queer family, breaking the fortress of fatherhood that has been preserved for men only. I beg to question the butch daddy's exclusive right to this quiet revolution. Gender expression per se is not necessarily representative of the (gaga) feminist mindset. Butch lesbians and trans men may exert just as „retro“ gender roles as their bio counterparts. Also, we may consider family formations that are located well beyond the standardized queer identities of butch-femme, particularly in an international context. Look to Stacey's *Unhitched* for information and inspiration about queer parenting (e.g. Stacey, J. 2011. *Unhitched. Love, Marriage, and Family Values from West Hollywood to Western China*. New York: NYU Press, <http://nyupress.org/books/9780814783825/>).

In the last chapter the author outlines a „Gaga Manifesto“ and makes connections particularly to the 99% movement as didactical inspiration, as a form of „political response that does not announce itself as politics; instead, it enters quietly into the public sphere, sits down, and refuses to leave“ (p. 134). This movement, like Gaga feminism, refuses to envision an outcome and embraces a sense of „carnavalesque failure.“ There is no return to normal life, because normal life is an illusion. Halberstam insists that this also requires that we organize separately from organizations and engage in creative anarchy, i.e. move beyond academia (where some may point out he himself sits comfortably in a full professor's chair, benefits included).

In sum, Gaga feminism is a feminism that recognizes multiple genders and should contribute to the collapse of the binary gender system. It is concerned with the reconfiguration of the meaning of sex and gender. Halberstam advocates heteroflexibility referring to Lisa Diamond who argues that sexual orientation ebbs and flows in some people, changing over the life course, not settling on one body or another. The coexistence of desires, such as bi- or pansexuality, is interestingly left out by Halberstam altogether and would deserve space and discussion in any learning environment (this may not come as a surprise given his own location as butch lesbian). Halberstam gives feminism a new twist as a political project, locating Lady Gaga as „merely the most recent marker of the withering away of old social models of desire, gender, and sexuality, and as a channel for potent new forms of relation, intimacy, technology, and embodiment“(p. 25).

It also makes sense to examine what Gaga feminism might have to offer for learning environments. I want to continue this conversation with a few takeaways I distilled for my own teaching practise:

### Try a „what if“ approach.

Gaga is a form of feminism „that lives between the ‚what‘ and the ‚if“ (p. 8). Halberstam’s „what if“ approach is valuable for any learning environment and leaves space for creative answers and more questions. Halberstam raises questions that serve as useful guidelines and starting points for any genders and sexualities classroom: What if we gendered people according to their behavior? What if we acknowledged that sexuality may shift over the lifecourse? What if boys wear skirts? The „what if“ approach may also work applied to the very methods we teach. What if we turned around or at least shared the power and made students our teachers?

### Apply a „how weird is that“ lens.

Halberstam rightly points out that heterosexuality gets little attention in college classrooms. The (heteronormative) assumption is that we all know how heterosexuality works and thus we look at the „weirdos“ at the fringes and discuss non-normative sexualities and gender identities. (Also because they have the aura of the exotic and catch the attention of students, I would add). In his own teaching practise, Halberstam switches from a „try to be tolerant of these weirdos“ approach to a „how weird is that“ approach. The focus is on the strangeness of heterosexuality and normative masculinity and femininity as well as their unhealthy implications. For Halberstam „[...] what we call „men“ and „women“ are bodies that have generally been trained in either the interruption of desire (women) or its free flow (men)“ (p. 12). This is well manifested in the social reality of Viagra for men, and plastic surgeries for women.

### Operate from and within the lifeworlds of your students.

Halberstam uses a wealth of US-centric examples from pop culture, film, and media. Using Lady Gaga as a metaphor is an attempt to connect contemporary feminism to the iconography students are familiar with (p. 6). Gaga feminism is tech-positive feminism; it acknowledges the possibilities of the interpenetration of humanity and technology in a Harraway-tradition. For Halberstam this feminism is not about women. It is about shifting, morphing, and keeping up with multimedia environments – „and if you don’t go gaga soon, you may wake up and realize you have missed the future and become the past“ (p. 29). As much as this will help to connect to students in a classroom, some may rightly argue that this puts the pressure on to assimilate to mainstream culture and tech environments. So are we then helping to build the very house and the surveillance mechanisms we wanted to dismantle as gaga feminists? Also, if we take seriously that students bodies are way more diverse and extend beyond the white, middle class, 18 to 26 year old segment, we have to be wary not to be exclusive (and boring) when picking from (white/young) pop culture (as Halberstam mostly does) in order to deconstruct the gender order and the power differential in the classroom. Even more interesting it might be to let students pick examples from their experience and interest areas to illustrate the concepts we seek to illustrate. This approach of a “reversed classroom” would also

enable us teachers to learn from students in non normative and constructive ways (see also below).

### Honor, question, and develop further the basic principles of gaga feminism.

Halberstam lays out a few principles or rules for gaga feminists that leave the reader unsatisfied as they remain somewhat rudimentary and vague. They deserve deeper exploration and substantiation with practical illustrations, which might even be a fun assignment in a (gaga) feminist classroom.

- i. *Let go of basic assumptions of bodies, people, and desire.* For teachers, this also means -- *let go of assumptions about your students.* For instance I have students fill out name cards on the first day of class, and I also tell them to note their preferred pronoun in order to prevent assumptions about their gender identity. This exercise usually results in some perplexed faces which in turn sparks a good discussion. We can as a group go from there and gently remind ourselves during the semester when we make unreflected assumptions about ourselves and social phenomena.
- ii. *Look at the margins, don't watch the ball, watch the crowd.* Halberstam explains that in baseball you don't evaluate where a ball goes by watching the ball itself but by watching the crowd react to it. With this brief example he argues to look at the peripheries and the margins for social transformation. His book -- mainly based on mainstream cultural examples -- is not a good example of this very strategy. Also, Halberstam's use of Lady Gaga might be quite a risk, since we do not know yet where the crowd will be looking in a decade from now. Will Lady Gaga be even around then in our minds? Will it prove to be short sighted to use such a mainstream cultural icon as the frame for a new brand of feminism? But maybe these questions also do not matter since we are not to watch the ball but work with and learn from the crowd.
- iii. *Think counterintuitively, act accordingly.* In every sociology 101 class, you learn to question common sense and dare to transgress normativity as person, as students and as teacher. What does this practice look like in concrete terms? In your classroom?
- iv. *Practice creative non-believing* - „God has got to go go religion is a no no.“ When it comes to gender norms, religion is the root of all evil. Gaga feminism is a dedicated „anti-christian doctrine“ (p. 28) that encourages people to become non-believers or at least keep their spiritual beliefs to themselves. With this principle, the inclusive vision of Gaga feminism is undermined. How could we reformulate this suggestion to allow for a queer embrace of spirituality while rejecting fundamentalism in every faith (not only the Christian faith)?

### Learn in unusual, non-nomative places

Halberstam's inspiration for the book comes from Lady Gaga, a famed „monster“, but also from contemporary social movements and children. He states that „the art of going gaga“ is „a politics of free falling, wild thinking, and imaginative reinvention best exemplified by children under the age of eight, women over the age of 45, and the vast armies of the marginalized, the abandoned, and the unproductive“ (p. xv). That means for *us* as facilitators of learning to learn in non-normative places, but also allow students to explore the margins and the unusual in order to better understand the social world around them. Along these lines he asks: „What if we actually let up on the training of children and allow ourselves to be retrained instead?“ (p. xxv). So, what if we actually go into a classroom and radically learn from our students? So what if we send them out to participate in a protest instead of projecting the 67th PowerPoint into tired faces?

Going gaga, as I understand it, means to take risks as an academic, both in our scholarship and in the classroom. „As we go loudly and grandly gaga, we should be aiming for nothing less than intellectual emancipation, nothing less than total transformation of learning, and nothing short of chaos. In order to disorder the university, we need to think small but act big, take risks, and propel ourselves into the path of all kinds of coming insurrections.“ (p. 145). It is of course questionable how gaga we can go *and* continue to get a paycheck. Halberstam, a white, popular, full professor, is certainly able to take bigger risks without having to fear loss of reputation and income generating work. Going gaga feminist is also not radically different from feminist pedagogy as we have known it for decades – questioning power balance in the classroom, making sure marginalized voices are represented, leading by example and treating students respectfully while encouraging them to question the unquestioned. Yet Halberstam puts a new spin on it, gives us new terminology, and a lot more freedom to combine, reassemble, and create a queer bricolage style classroom. Gaga, as popularized by Lady Gaga, is associated with nonsense, madness (going gaga), surrealism (Dada); along these lines Gaga feminism „is a form of political expression that masquerades as naive nonsense but that actually participates in big and meaningful forms of critique“ (p. xxv).

## References

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