

BOOK REVIEWS

REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

Gaga Feminism: Gender, Sexuality, and the End of Normal. Judith Halberstam. Boston: Beacon Press. 2012.

Judith Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism: Gender, Sexuality, and the End of Normal* presents an overview and a straightforward interpretation of the new wave of feminism that has evolved from the music and public performances of Lady Gaga. Halberstam integrates autobiographical accounts of her lived experiences and social realities as they relate to gender, sexuality, and normalcy, while highlighting relevant cultural references to support her contention that Lady Gaga "is a symbol for a new kind of feminism" (xii) transversing the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality by expanding the definitions of heterosexuality and normalcy through her song lyrics and public appearances.

Utilizing gender theory, feminist theory, and queer theory, Halberstam draws on works by Elizabeth Freeman, Michel Foucault, Camille Paglia, Micha Cardenas, and Donna Haraway to list but a few. Furthermore, Halberstam expounds on the phenomenon surrounding Lady Gaga through the inclusion of relevant examples from music artists (Madonna, Grace Jones), television shows (*SpongeBob Square Pants*, *Desperate Housewives*), and movies (*Set it Off*, *Thelma & Louise*, and *The Hangover*). Featuring recent media productions, Halberstam integrates pertinent symbols, icons, and other discourses into her discussion of the feminist ideologies that have developed as a result of works produced by Lady Gaga. Halberstam uses the notion of "gaga feminism" to advance her argument that Lady Gaga is a symbol of popular culture, as well as a political activist challenging dominant discourses of gender, sexuality, and normalcy in her music, public appearances, and public performances.

Halberstam has structured *Gaga Feminism* in a way that figuratively takes readers by the hand and walks them through the processes employed to construct and expand the author's notion of "gaga feminism" which is defined as "a politic

that brings better mediations on fame and visibility with a lashing critique on the fixity of roles for males and females” (5). In the introductory chapter, Halberstam’s details the personal journey that was undertaken as part of her movement toward non-gendered classification based on the binary of male/female. This inspired Halberstam to explore the ways in which conventional definitions of gender, sexuality, and normalcy are being redefined and/or reappropriated through the utilization of “gaga feminism.” Incorporating the meteoric rise of Lady Gaga, in 2010, and her manipulation of traditional notions of gender, sexuality, and normalcy, Halberstam uses her concept “gaga feminism” to clearly and concisely rearticulate the reappropriation of larger societal discourses of male/female that have become blurred in the years following Lady Gaga’s arrival on the popular music scene.

In chapter one, Halberstam introduces “gaga feminism” as a youth social movement. The author described the ways in which her lyrics and public performances are used for social positioning by marginalized groups in larger societal conversations through the creation of a here-and-now consciousness reappropriating gender, sexuality, and normalcy discourses. Halberstam then discusses the perceived bonds of mother-daughter relationships as the foundation of gender role construction and the promotion of heterosexuality. This chapter is situated against discourses of “woman” and “womanhood;” thus, extending intergenerational discourses commonly associated with gender beyond physical attributes through the inclusion of aesthetics as sonic revolutions of individual mental and social empowerment.

Exploring gender as a hierarchy, Halberstam uses chapter two to examine the notion of transgendernism as an alternative classification beyond male and female. The author poses questions such as: Who can become pregnant? How can individuals conceive children? What constitutes a family? Using the story of the “first pregnant man and a similar case,” Halberstam explores the discourses surrounding transgendered women who bore children after beginning the process of becoming male. The notion of “pregnant men,” she argues, disrupted traditional social ideas associated with reproduction and redefined the nuclear family as a model of normality. Halberstam uses this line of inquiry and social responses to show the ways in which “gaga feminism” redefines the accepted conventional concept of “family” by including alternative kinship bonds such as single-parent households, same-sex parenting, and blended families.

Addressing broader social meanings associated with larger societal ideas of heterosexuality in chapter three, Halberstam encourages the development and use of a new gender classification system embedded in the idea of heteroflexibility. Halberstam defines heteroflexibility as the “reconfiguring of the meaning of sex and gender in ways that favor heterosexual women in particular.” Drawing on the character Dory from the film *Finding Nemo*, Halberstam describes Dory as a masculine female who is knowledgeable of female discourses, although she chooses not to fully engage in the associated dialogues. The author suggests that Dory embodies the use of “gaga feminism” through her fluid transitions between being female, a parent, and attracted to others in a romantic way. It is Halberstam’s position in this chapter that “gaga feminism” explores the world using multiple points of view and enable individuals or groups to reposition themselves in larger societal dialogues, while bringing their marginalized discourses to the center of larger societal conversations.

Investigating the significance of marriage in the era of “gaga feminism” chapter four, questions the ramifications of the legalization of gay and lesbian unions, Halberstam articulates the desire for social acceptance and feelings of normalcy as the rationale behind the social movement for marriage equality. Using her narrative, Halberstam considers herself “grumpy about gay marriage” (97). The author describes an incident in which she was asked to sign a petition for the legalization of gay marriage in California. Refusing to sign she instead questioned the logic of the individual in his recruitment of signatures for an institution that gays and lesbians have already been excluded from entering. Halberstam contends that although Lady Gaga advocates marriage equality that “gaga feminism” embraces alternative forms of committed relationships that are not necessarily socially recognized by the larger society such as cohabitation and commitment ceremonies. Offering a “new form of politics,” Halberstam asserts that “gaga feminism” is an all-inclusive philosophy that promotes liberatory praxis for marginalized groups in discourses of gender, sexuality, and normalcy across the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality (133).

Gaga Feminism initiates novice scholars to the role of popular culture in politics, theory, and discourses of gender, sexuality, and normalcy. Halberstam provides a narrative synopsis of the influence of Lady Gaga on conventional notions of gender theory, feminist theory, and queer theory. Using each section of the book to solidify her argument, regarding Lady Gaga as “a symbol for a new kind of feminism” (xii), Halberstam uses cultural references and other relevant

examples to connect her assertion across chapters. This book contains a preface, introduction, and detailed notes that presents the reader with several sites for continued studies. The structure of *Gaga Feminism* may be useful as a primer for beginning theoretical courses, popular culture courses, cultural studies and foundations courses, as well as women and gender studies courses. Overall, Halberstam expanded the breadth and understandings of traditional notions of gender theory, feminist theory, and queer theory in this book by providing a comprehensive exploration of the politics associated with Lady Gaga that have emerged and redefined these conventional conceptual frameworks.

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Harry Potter and the Millennials: Research Methods and the Politics of the Muggle Generation. Anthony Gierzynski with Kathryn Eddy. Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press, 2013.

A common belief about the millennial generation is that we are narcissistic, lazy, technologically dependent, and forever leeching off our parents. Anthony Gierzynski and Kathryn Eddy's book *Harry Potter and the Millennials: Research Methods and the Politics of the Muggle Generation* (2013) challenges this notion. Essentially, the thesis argues that those who have read the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling have a higher chance of being open-minded, accepting of diversity, and politically liberal (Gierzynski 6). The *Harry Potter* series is a coming of age, or bildungsroman tale, in seven volumes, of a young boy who discovers he is a wizard and enters into a secret magical society. *Harry Potter* fandom has spawned countless websites, blogs, podcasts, tribute bands, and games. Even some of Rowling's terms such as a Muggle or Voldemort, have entered into our common lexicography. Fanfiction.net currently has 659,000 stories about Harry Potter. It is clear there is a strong fan-base for Harry Potter and it is not disappearing.

Gierzynski and Eddy are clear in their point of view: fans may not necessarily exhibit all of the above-mentioned traits, but they have a higher chance of doing so due to the cultural hysteria behind the *Harry Potter* books. The authors discuss

the principals of cultivation theory, which in quick summary, concludes that the repetition of the lessons of Harry Potter had a larger impact in fans seeing the world in a similar way (Gierzynski 29). Gierzynski clarifies the central proposal with comparisons from the past, explaining, “Leaving Harry Potter out of the history of the millennials would be like leaving Star Wars out of Generation X” (Gierzynski 40). Gierzynski uses the definition of millennial (individuals born between 1982 and 2002) from the work *Millennials Rising* by Howe and Strauss. Within Harry Potter’s magical world, readers find numerous parallels to their own lives, especially in politics. The most fallible characters are those who want power at all costs.

According to Gierzynski and Eddy, millennials who read *Harry Potter* were more likely to vote for Obama for president and have a pessimistic viewpoint of the Bush era presidency. He specifically cites an 83 percent negative viewpoint of Bush for those who read *Harry Potter* compared to those who have not (59). The authors derive their results from a survey of 1,141 college students. While the sample is diverse, from universities to community colleges and religious colleges, they conclude that a more refined statistical analysis needs to be compiled from the results (62). That is a fair point. If the survey were opened up to more college communities, there would be a better opportunity for extended and in-depth research.

The most interesting conclusion from Gierzynski’s research from an English and reading standpoint was not the political ramifications of Millennial *Harry Potter* readers, rather that Millennials have a higher likelihood of being readers due to Rowling’s series (Gierzynski 45). Harry Potter novels served as a gateway text to other fantasy works, such as *Lord of the Rings*, *Golden Compass*, and a *Series of Unfortunate Events*. Reading, in turn, encourages members of the population to become more civic and active in government, thus increasing perception.

The films are also taken into consideration in the analysis, but it is weighted less heavily. In addition, the *Harry Potter* books were considered to have a more powerful effect on those born in between 1982 and 1992. Millennials between the ages of eight and eighteen when the *Harry Potter* series become wildly popular were the most affected (Gierzynski 42), as well as those whose parents encouraged them to read the books (Gierzynski 65).

Gierzynski’s text meditates on how we become politically socialized. It is our parents, friends, and teachers, as well as our entertainment that shape who we

become. From the Millennial age, we learn that it is our popular culture that helps us become who we are today. Moving past texts that serve as required reading in the school system, evaluating what students read for entrainment is crucial in determining one's future political beliefs.

The real magic in Harry Potter is not the witches and wizards or even the flying hippogriffs; instead, it is the contribution to a politically-conscious society. Although it is primarily a political science text, *Harry Potter and the Millennials: Research Methods and the Politics of the Muggle Generation* is written in a compelling format. Fans of the books might be especially interested in its findings, however, non-readers would also benefit from taking a look at this smart, well-written analysis about how Potter influenced politics.

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