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The Performance Identities of Lady Gaga: Critical Essays

Edited by Richard J Gray, Jefferson

NC: Mcfarland, 2012, ISBN: 978-0-7864-6830-0

Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal

By J. Jack Halberstam, Boston

MA: Beacon Press, 2012, ISBN: 978-0-8070-1098-3

Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays

By Bernadette Barton

New York: New York University Press, 2012, ISBN: 978-0-8147-8637-6

Review by

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Scholarship on Popular Culture studies has seen a renewed surge of interest in recent years. William's, writing about popular culture in 1963 identified three related elements- the 'lived' experience of people, the 'documentary'; element which deals with the actual transmission of meaning and finally the 'ideal' element. In this review I look at three recent books which engage with these three elements in relation to sexuality, gender, religion and pop culture.

In the first book, *The Performance Identities of Lady Gaga*, the editor at the very outset sets up his motivation for a scholarly collection of essays on Lady Gaga, who is probably one of the most well known (and controversial) pop musicians of the last few years. Gray calls Lady Gaga a performance in herself- a reflection of her own personal self and of contemporary society. Performance studies consider performance as a creation of reality. Lady Gaga has over the years used her music to raise awareness and create a social dialogue without making it conscious. Be it her controversial 'Telephone' or the more recent 'Born this way', she has always challenged hegemonic lived realities critiquing the US government's Don't Ask Don't Tell Policy or challenging the status quo. Humann in her essay, 'What drag' states that, 'through her performance art, Lady Gaga challenges society to think differently- about gender and a range of other issues that she finds

important. Lady Gaga states that challenging society to think in a different way is one of her goals' (79).

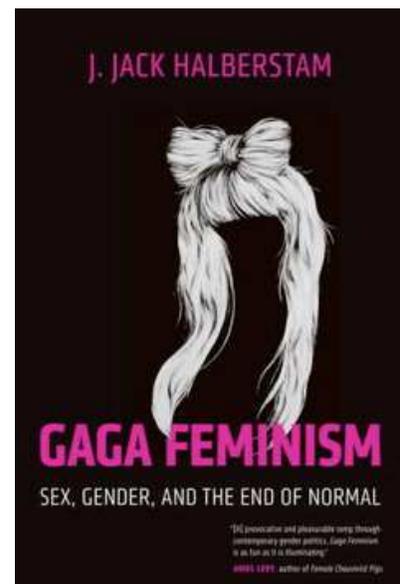
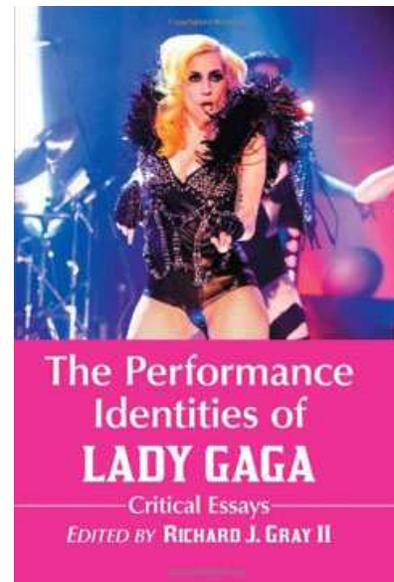
The editor's own essay, 'Surrealism, the theatre of cruelty and Lady Gaga' does a fine job of introducing readers to surrealism in pop culture and studying the surrealist inspirations that permeate Lady Gaga's performance identity. He argues that Gaga appropriates a surrealist foundation as a component of her performance identity and by doing this 'fashions a new means of fragmenting the spectators perception of reality' (140). This essay resonates with Gaga's own name which is ascribed to the surrealist tradition.

A final essay which I would like to briefly discuss is Gray-Rosendale, Capaldo, Craig and Davalo's essay, 'Whitness and the Politics of Post Racial America' which traces some key discourses concerning race and Lady Gaga through an analysis of her music videos specially *Bad Romance* and *Telephone*. The authors contend that 'White Privilege allows her [Gaga] to move effortlessly between the norm and the Other in her performance art' In contrast the authors argue 'Non Whites the perpetual Other do not often have the privilege of negotiating between such identities' (222). The popularity of Gaga creates discursive spaces through which white privilege can be examined, but as the authors critically note it also forces us to consider the complex discourses around race in contemporary culture.

The second book, Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism* in many ways furthers the argument that Gray only touched upon. J. Jack Halberstam needs no introduction to scholars and students of social sciences. Halberstam uses 'the meteoric rise to fame of Lady Gaga to hint at emerging formulations of a gender politics for a new generation'. She argues that 'this feminism is invested in innovative deployments of feminist and finds them to be well represented by pop performances characterised by their excess, their ecstatic embrace of loss of control, and a maverick sense of bodily identity' (xiii).

Halberstam's book should not be confused as a paean to Gaga, rather Halberstam is quite unenthusiastic about her support of gay marriage and repeal of 'don't ask don't tell.' What Halberstam proposes is using Gaga as a tool for a radical rethinking.

the term "gaga" for me represented a set of wholesale changes that may be most obvious in the realm of gender norms but that also stretch to many other realms of



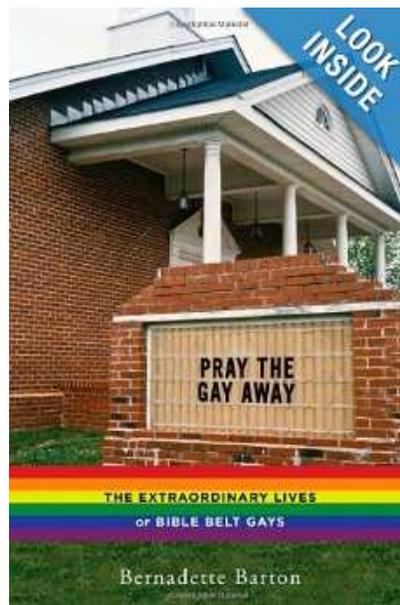
everyday experience and that call for an improvisational feminism that keeps pace with the winds of political change. (10)

Gaga feminism already exists (albeit not in that name) in different forms. This 'brand' of feminism is not about 'motherhood, sisterhood, sorority or even women' (29). In a fierce critique of feminists such as Susan Faludi who are committed to a reform model of feminism, to the idea of feminism as a politics built around stable definitions of (white) womanhood and as a ladies' club of influence and moral dignityⁱ, Halberstam posits Gaga feminism as random acts by 'gaga' people who are improvising revolution and reimagining, shifting and questioning political positions. Lady Gaga here is merely the locus around which such revolutionary acts can take place. As Halberstam writes:

gaga feminism will locate 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 (25)

I especially loved her analysis of key moments from popular (read low brow) films such as the Jennifer Lopez starrer, *The Back Up Plan*; Jennifer Anniston's *The Switch* and others. Of *The Switch*, she writes, "The film begins with an interesting premise about female reproductive independence, in other words, but ends with a deeply conservative and cowardly narrative about the mysteriously magnetic qualities of blood that draw biologically related people together and knit them into perfect little families' (38), another instance where Gaga feminism can make inroads.

The final book, Bernadette Barton's, *Pray the Gay Away: the Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays* completes this three way dialogue. Barton paints a vivid picture of living as queer person in the 'red states' of USA. She recounts how conservative Christianity weighs down on queer people through institutional homophobia.ⁱⁱ This is a striking look at the divided political and social terrain of the United States that Halberstam paints in the earlier book. Whilst States such as New York and Connecticut have strode ahead and made tremendous progress in securing rights for queer people, states in the bible belt lack domestic partnership benefits, openly discriminate against queer people by firing them from jobs, churches and social ostracism. Barton introduces, what she calls the 'toxic closet'- individuals having to choose between keeping silent and hiding their sexuality or face rejection and ostracism from friends, family and employers.



Using case studies, Barton goes about documenting the lives of gay men and women living in the Bible belt. The church as, Barton explains is the locus around which communities grow in these parts.

There is a collective expectation that church is a safe and holy place, and parishioners and community members are socialized to defer to the authority of the church leaders, there is little scrutiny of the content of sermons, the action of parishioners, or the possible sexism, racism and homophobia preached and practiced (67)

This leads to self esteem issues, as Barton notes. Not only are the gay individuals having to hide their sexuality but having to endure sitting through sermons calling them sinners and calling for their death in extreme cases. Many of the case studies show how individuals had to compartmentalize their various identities with no way of reconciliation.

Barton notes that for many respondents this life of being othered gave them a unique position, which her respondents described as ‘the view from the margins’ (205). Citing Patricia Hill Collins, Barton states that when members of oppressed groups such as the gay individuals living in the Bible belt interact in intimate settings with majority members, they notice the contradictions between the dominant group’s actions and ideologies. Barton is optimistic that the lives gay men and women lead in the Bible belts make them stronger and also ‘earn enduring friendships and increased happiness’ (237).

The common thread I found in all three books was its engagement with a new form of social politics that was both meant to be radical as well as not conforming to what is accepted liberalism. To quote Halberstam, ‘When you are open to a new feminism, that joins forces with the oppositional movements sweeping the globe, you will finally realize that we are already living in the future we have always tried to imagine’ (140).

I highly recommend all three books to scholars, activists, students and anyone who is interested in a good book.

Notes

ⁱ See Halberstam (2012). Lady Gaga Embodies a New Model of Feminism. *WeNEWS*, <http://womensenews.org/story/cultural-trendspopular-culture/121012/lady-gaga-embodies-new-model-feminism#.UNV3cuTZaSo>

ⁱⁱ Also see, Chris Pullen (2012) (ed.) *LGBT Transnational Identity and the Media* for more examples of how evangelism is spreading homophobia in the African continent and Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey, *Between a Man and a Woman: Why Conservatives Oppose Same-Sex Marriage*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2010

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