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ONE

## Gaga Feminism for Beginners

Lead her away from Acting but not all the way to Finance. Something where she can make her own hours but still feel intellectually fulfilled and get outside sometimes. And not have to wear high heels ... What would that be, Lord? Architecture? Midwifery? Golf course design? I'm asking You, because if I knew, I'd be doing it, Youdammit.

—Tina Fey, from “The Mother’s Prayer for  
Its Daughter,” *Bossypants*

## THE MOMMIE DEAREST CURSE

I first floated my idea of gaga feminism at a conference at the New School in New York City in which a host of feminists, young and old, participated. The conference, “No Longer in Exile,” consisted of huge panels and a lot of slightly random talks that failed to add up to any kind of State of the Union event on feminism. On one panel, Susan Faludi, the famed author of *Backlash*, spoke on the mother-daughter dynamic, telling the audience that younger women, by not respecting their foremothers, were undermining feminism. She never really explained why the mother-daughter relationship presents itself as the ideal model for feminism, toxic, at best, as it sometimes is. (Think Mommie Dearest ... think Santa Monica mom calorie-counting with her daughter and getting her a nose job for her sweet sixteen ... think Forever 21 moms shopping alongside their preteen daughters, the daughters dressing too old, the mothers too young ... ah, yes, a wonderful model for feminism)! And Faludi seemed to have missed several generations of theoretical works by feminist theorists that had moved us well and truly away from mommy-daughter debutante politics and pushed us firmly into gender variance, gender performativity, women of color feminisms, and more. Faludi also ignored the many challenges made to generational logics within a recent wave of queer theory on temporality. In my own work on queer time, I have

shown that queer people do not follow the same logics of subcultural involvement as their heterosexual counterparts: they do not “outgrow” certain forms of cultural activity (like clubbing, punk, and so on) the way heterosexuals are presumed to do. Rather, queer spaces tend to be multigenerational and do not subscribe to the notion of one generation always giving way to the next. Other theorists, such as Elizabeth Freeman, have elaborated more mobile notions of intergenerational exchange, arguing that the old does not always have to give way for the new, the new does not have to completely break with the old, and that these waves of influence need not be thought of always and only as parental.

It appeared Faludi was aware of none of these conversations, and instead cast the mother-daughter bond as transhistorical, transcultural, universal, blaming its corrosion for internal rifts in the feminist project. While casting that project as a kind of twisted Electra complex within which daughters are committed to killing off mothers, Faludi sounded more Freudian than Freud—at least the father of the Oedipus complex, castration anxiety, and penis envy saw these intergenerational struggles as symbolic rather than literal! Faludi did not differentiate by class or race; she made no mention of queer challenges to the normativity of the family and of generational thinking; and she cast the mother-daughter relationship as some

static bond between older and younger women—the category of “woman” was not in question, the fragility of family bonds barely registered, and the audience was simply asked to accept that if we could fix the mother-daughter dynamic, feminism would be alive and well.

In short, Faludi seemed out of date. And, so, at this long conference on the state of feminist theory, she floated her rather anemic idea and then sneered at the concept of a new kind of feminism, a gaga feminism that might be symbolized by the antics, the appearances, the fantasy worlds of Lady Gaga and other popular cultural figures. What on earth was gaga feminism? she wanted to know. What could it possibly offer? She proceeded to publish her misgivings about gaga feminism and her adherence to familial structures for feminism in Harper’s Magazine. Indeed, the front page of Harper’s October 2010 issue said it all: “American Electra: Feminism’s Ritual Matricide.”<sup>1</sup> According to Faludi’s article, American feminism has a mother-daughter problem: daughters keep fighting with mothers, mothers keep being undercut by their daughters, and this, apparently, is the real reason that feminism never quite gets its revolutionary interventions right. Faludi trotted through some rather predictable and tame histories of women’s social movements, surveying what have come to be known as the first, second, and third waves of feminism, better

known in terms of their battles: women's suffrage and temperance movements in the first wave; equal rights and abortion rights in the second wave; and equal opportunities in the workplace and in education in the third wave. Faludi holds up as an excellent model of mother-daughter feminism Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her daughter, Harriot Stanton Blatch. After offering this vapid version of very white, very liberal feminism, Faludi then, remarkably, ends up somewhere in the vicinity of our contemporary moment, winding down to a drearily pessimistic conclusion—feminism is dead, we killed it—and punctuating this sad insight with a kind of amusing send-up of yours truly.

In her caricature of me, I am cast as “Judith ‘Jack’ Halber-stam, a gender-studies professor from the University of Southern California who favors crew cuts and men’s suits.”<sup>2</sup> She noted, generously, that I was “the most popular speaker” at the conference, but she gives no sense of what I said and why it might appeal to the students gathered there. Instead, Faludi concluded her analysis of the mother-daughter problem with a rather predictable lament about long-winded academics who have been entrusted with a valuable archive of knowledge but who choose to squander that legacy by passing it over in favor of highfalutin jargon. She writes:

Women’s studies was originally envisioned as the repository of feminist

history and memory, where accumulated knowledge would be enshrined in a safe box where future generations could go to retrieve it. That academic mother-lode is in danger of being decommissioned by the increasing disconnect between practical, political feminism and academic feminist theory, and by the rise of a poststructuralist philosophy in gender studies that prefers the deconstructing of female experience to the linkages and legacies of women's history and regards generational dynamics, and even the categories of "woman" and "man," as artifices to perform and discard.<sup>3</sup>

Even this critique of academics is rather old-fashioned, with its quaint notions of a big bad theoretical bully that comes along to bludgeon the good and true accounts of women's experience. Why are we going back to these kinds of quarrels, and, moreover, how did I come to be the bad guy in "feminism's ritual matricide"? As at many such events, at the New School conference, there were good talks, bad talks, indifferent talks—there was the obvious, the painfully obvious, and that was just the social science stuff ... and so when I had my turn to speak, on one of the last panels of the day, I tried to mix it up a little by infusing the conversation with humor, a bit of provocation, commenting on what we had heard in a way that might form a bridge to the many young people who were in attendance but who seemed bored out of their skulls. While Faludi characterizes me as a glib twit who proposed Lady Gaga as the answer to what ails feminism, I actually had tried to show that

Lady Gaga, in her duet with Beyoncé in the viral music video Telephone, provides an exciting and infectious model of sapphic sisterhood that moves beyond sentimental models of romantic friendship and into a different kind of feminism, one more in line with the intimate bonds that animate violence in films such as Set It Off and Thelma and Louise.

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 feminism that borrows promiscuously, steals from everywhere, and inhabits the ground of stereotype and cliché all at the same time. Gaga feminism is also a feminism made up of stutter steps and hiccups, as is clear in the world opened up in Telephone in both the music and the image: the off-beat, flickering, humming aesthetic that the video creates depends upon the liveliness of objects in the Gagascape (and the inertia of the human bodies), and it creates a beat for Gaga that is best represented as a sonic form of hesitation.

While I am not proposing that there is some kind of clear feminist program for social change in the world of Gaga, activists of all stripes and queer activists in particular have always looked to popular culture for inspiration and have refused facile distinctions between culture and reality. The Lady Gaga piece of my talk was an attempt to connect contemporary



feminism to young people and students in particular by building upon the popular iconography in which many of them had already invested considerable hope. But, more than just a humorous ending to a lecture, 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.

At the conference, the students connected with the version of feminism that I linked to Lady Gaga, while old-school feminists like Susan Faludi wanted to brush this same version aside. And Faludi has not been the only feminist who is wary of the rush to find the political energy channeled by Lady Gaga. Madonna acolyte and 1990s feminist icon Camille Paglia also shrugged off Lady Gaga’s appeal in a widely read op-ed in the London Sunday Times Magazine in 2010.<sup>4</sup> In her piece, Paglia asserts that Lady Gaga is simply the “diva of déjà-vu” and a copycat who latches onto a generation of glazed-eyed Internet clones and exploits its incapacity to think or know anything without an iPhone app or Twitter feed at hand. Gaga, for Paglia, represents the end of culture, the end of civilization, the end of truth, values, and meaning, the end of sex, and the triumph of a robotic age emptied of human sentiment. While some feminists, like Donna Haraway,

have advocated for new forms of feminism capable of keeping up with technological innovation, Paglia argues that we have lost touch with what is real, true, and good in our mania for media manipulation, video games, and cell phones. If Haraway recognizes an interpenetration of humanity and technology in the digital age that is exciting and wondrous (even as it is also exploitative and dangerous), Paglia sees, predictably, a manufactured public realm populated by media puppets and their passive and stupid fans. If Lady Gaga's supporters have recognized in her a newish formula of femininity, phones, and desire, Camille Paglia sees only same-old, same-old or, in her words, "the exhausted end of the sexual revolution."

Why are feminists like Paglia and Faludi so wary of new figures of feminist fantasy, women like Lady Gaga or Lil' Kim or Rihanna or Nicki Minaj or Jenni Rivera or even Ke\$ha, women who use sex boldly in their music, who flaunt their bodies but who also remain insistently in charge of their mass media images, women who, like Ke\$ha, sing songs with titles like "Party at a Rich Dude's House" and rap about being young, drunk, lost, and loving it? (My friend, theorist Micha Cardenas, is countering gaga feminism with her own Ke\$ha feminism!) While it is easy to dismiss some of this material as just mindless pop, at the same time, we might want to look again at singers who, after all, appeal to large numbers of young female fans. Why

can't these women be new figures of feminism? In the end, feminists like Faludi 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 dignity. Finally, the mother-daughter bond, which for Faludi is most successfully studied in the dynamic between Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her daughter Harriet, allows, according to Faludi, for the gains of one age to be passed on to the next. But never does Faludi question whether the gains of white women in one era actually benefit women of color in the next, or whether the goals of white middle-class women reflect anything beyond their race and class interests.

## WHAT IF ... ?

So, disregarding the fantasy of a peaceful transfer of knowledge to the daughters, let's leave family, mommies, babies, and whiny feminism behind and move onward, upward, gaga-ward. Gaga is a hypothetical form of feminism, one that lives in between the "what" and the "if": What if we gendered people according to their behavior? What if gender shifted over the course of a lifetime—what if someone began life as a boy but became a boygirl and then a boy/man? What if some males are ladies, some ladies are butch, some butches are women, some women are gay, some gays are feminine, some femmes are straight, and some straight people don't know what the hell is going on? What if we live in a world where things happen so fast that the life span, and progress through it, looks very different than it did only two decades ago? What if you begin life as a queer mix of desires and impulses and then are trained to be heterosexual but might relapse into queerness once the training wears off? What if the very different sexual training that boys and girls receive makes them less and less compatible? What if girls stopped wearing pink, boys started wearing skirts, women stopped competing with other women, and men stopped grabbing their crotches in public? What if we actually started to notice the ways in which race and sexuality have become hopelessly entangled with notions of the

normal and the perverse, so that we could see the ways in which the white family hides its secrets behind thick layers of presumed normativity, while black families in particular but also Latino and Muslim families are regularly cast as excessive or intolerant, traditional and behind the times? The “what if” is fun and hopeful but it is also serious and penetrating and might just bring us to the brink of new ideas about old topics.

In a more serious vein, what if sexual orientation could also be read as less fixed, less determined, more negotiated and fluid? What if we actually stopped and recognized the multiple ways in which men and women, boys and girls, exceed and fall short of the definitions that give those categories heft and longevity? And why should we do all this? Because despite all reasonable predictions, we live in a world that still controls girls and girl sexualities within a rigid system of blocks, taboos, and prohibitions. And we still expect boys to punish each other into “normal” forms of masculinity and then compete and agitate for female attention in ways that make women into killjoys, moral arbiters, and passive bystanders at the prom, still waiting to be asked to dance. And this early training is very misleading in the sense that, once the early courtship between men and women is complete, very often it is the woman who becomes the active partner in the relationship, bullying her male partner into marriage, childrearing, domestic responsibility,

and more. Her presumed passivity has to morph quickly and definitively into a multitasking, frantic form of controlling authority. His presumed activity has to transform just as completely into a quiescent, submissive mode that makes him the sous-chef to her ratatouille. In fact, gendered adulthood nowadays often represents a total reversal of the gender roles that have been drummed into children, and this is true across ethnic groups and classes. In fact, it is well known that as an industrial economy has given way to a service economy, and especially in the economic downturn of the early twenty-first century, women have done better economically than men, so much so that in many households, women are the main wage earners.

There are many different versions of the female-headed household—in working-class households, particularly black households, many men have been incarcerated within an increasingly unfair system of justice that penalizes men of color for petty crimes while exonerating white businessmen for bankrupting the nation. Female-headed households are also found among white middle-class communities, often because, even when men are present, they are un- or underemployed. Or, more worryingly, they choose not to work and think of themselves as “artists,” “poets,” “musicians,” as dreamers who are so alternative, they are cool enough to let their wives bring home the

bacon while they make a bit of cash here or there through their “art.” Academic women, it turns out, according to my own very informal poll, are particularly susceptible to these new, alternative forms of masculinity—many female academics and female professionals in general are supporting men who have chosen not to grow up, not to take economic responsibility for others, and who are happy to give up on the rat race of actually making a living. They do all this, by the way, often without taking on extra responsibility for domestic labor.

The excessive training that we give to boys and girls to transform them from anarchic, ungendered blobs into gender automatons, then is (a) dangerous, and (b) not necessary, and (c) not actually consistent with lived reality. And as some girls grow up to become anorexics and some boys grow up to become bullies, many girls grow up to be overachieving micromanagers, and many boys grow up to be underachieving slackers, yet we still refuse to give up on the models of masculinity and femininity that have been established as ordinary and normal and good. And we spend very little time, relatively speaking, attending to the problems with this model of heterosexuality and figuring out how to fix them.

In university gender-studies classes, heterosexuality gets scant treatment, mostly because we all assume that we know all too well how heterosexuality works

and, therefore, by the same logic, what we really need to teach and learn about are all the fringe sexualities that become the targets for homophobic and transphobic policies and attitudes. When I taught an Introduction to Gender and Sexuality class, this was very much the approach I took. As a queer person, and a gender-queer person whose gender was indeterminate on a good day, I became exhibit A in the freak show that the class became. Every week, a mostly heterosexual lecture hall would be treated to fascinating information about gays, lesbians, transgender people, intersexuality, and so on, but the students would rarely be asked to think about how this information affected them and their own sexualities. And so, a couple of years ago, tired of being on show, I began teaching the same course, Introduction to Gender and Sexuality, as How on Earth Does Heterosexuality Work? OK, it was not actually called that, but that was the basic message of the class from start to finish. Using clips from *Desperate Housewives*, *The Sopranos*, *The Bachelor*, and other TV shows, I would act like an anthropologist visiting a strange group of people engaged in odd sexual rituals, showing the class what heterosexuality looked like from the outside.

In many ways, the “How weird is that?” approach to heterosexuality in the context of gender studies works much better than the “Try to be tolerant of these



weirdos” approach showcasing queerness. It forces the very students who are deeply invested in norms, their own and other people’s, to face the music and look at their own investments, their own issues, their own struggles with what is supposed to come naturally. The focus on the strangeness of heterosexuality allowed us to think through eating disorders as a vicious side effect of adolescent misogyny; it forced men in the class to ask themselves about their own relations to masculinity, to other men, to women, and to homophobia. And it led women to notice the significant differences between the ways in which they developed peer relations with other women (friendships often focused on food, clothes, and boys), and the ways men developed peer relations with other men (friendships focused on male bonding, drinking, and sports, but rarely stemming from long discussions about girls).

In these classes, I also used the example of pornography, not to berate men for turning their attention away from their flesh-and-blood partners and directing it toward online sexual imagery, but rather to reveal the stark differences in outcome of the sexual training of boys and girls. While girls experience sexual awakenings largely in the context of the matrices of prohibitions that I described earlier, and while in most girls desire is never actually given a chance to flow and weave itself around objects and fetishes, boys are quickly encouraged and incited to feel desire, to direct

that desire, to indulge desire. Pornographic archives suggest the range and the depth of male sexual imaginaries (Chicks with dicks! Fat chicks! Muscle chicks! Hairy chicks!), and women's magazines illustrate the narrowness and restriction of female sexual imaginaries (10 things he really wants sexually but is afraid to tell you ... 10 ways to please your man ... 10 ways to be a complete and utter bimbo so as not to threaten your boyfriend and make him lose his mojo). While not all pornography is for men, and not all women's magazines are read by women, 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). By the time heterosexual romance begins, the formula of male persuasion and female deferral, male solicitations and female refusals, male randiness and female frigidity, has already established a large part of the male-female sexual script. And as men and women age, heterosexuality requires all kinds of aids to maintain this formula—Viagra for men and plastic surgeries for women.

Again, none of this is to say that these stereotypes of heterosexual conduct are installed across all boys and all girls; just to note that the training we give men and women pushes each partner into very different relations to sex and to their bodies. The anthropologist of sexuality, Gayle Rubin, in fact, noted astutely

several decades ago that there has been a long history of training women's sexuality via the mechanism of restraint. In an extremely influential essay that tried to account for the production of the meaning of "male" and "female" in precapitalist and capitalist societies, Rubin noted that the meaning of "woman" in early human societies emerged out of the tendency of tribes and groups to create bonds with one another through the exchange of women.<sup>5</sup> This "traffic in women" then established the meaning of womanhood within a system of "institutionalized heterosexuality," and kinship rested upon the circulation of women between and among men within a set of taboos (incest, homosexuality) and according to a set of obligatory forms (reproductive heterosexuality). As Rubin summarized neatly: "Kinship systems dictate some sculpting of the sexuality of both sexes."<sup>6</sup> She continues: "It would be in the interests of the smooth and continuous operation of such a system if the woman in question did not have too many ideas of her own about whom she might want to sleep with. From the standpoint of the system, the preferred female sexuality would be one which responded to the desires of others, rather than one which actively desired and sought a response."<sup>7</sup> Now, of course, we are a long way from "bridewealth," dowries, and the traffic in women, but the system of sexualities and genders that preceded capitalism and turned women into a form of currency

did not, contrary to expectations, simply fade away once wage labor came into the picture and offered women ways of earning their own living. In fact, capitalism also made claims on women, claims that required them to perform domestic tasks for free, for example, and capitalism also benefited from a compliant female sexuality.

Capitalism also benefits, as I implied earlier, from the control of children's sexuality, and in the United States, we control children's sexuality to the point of making their budding desires less sources of pleasure and more vectors for abuse. As Judith Levine claims in the title of her brave and controversial book, protecting kids from sex is "harmful to minors."<sup>8</sup> Rather than confirming the popular opinion that access to sex can be damaging to kids, Levine leverages evidence of media-fueled panics about child abductions, satanic rituals, and pedophilia to show that holding back information from children about abortion, sexual experimentation, and contraception has had a disastrous impact on several generations of American kids and their parents. Levine argues, in gaga feminist style, that conservative and often religious-based panics over any and all signs of sexuality in children have dire consequences. As she puts it, a zealous watchfulness in relation to child sexual expression has contributed to a "gradual pathologizing of normative children's sexuality," and, accordingly, what we even

mean by normal behavior gets pushed “a few notches to the right.”<sup>9</sup>

Levine is rightfully wary of the term “normal,” especially when it cozies up to its twin concept “natural,” and she works hard to reveal how, where, and when our understanding of the normal gets manufactured, repurposed, recirculated, and then leveraged for the purposes of control. All these mechanisms that constrict and constrain children’s desires become part of the equation of what they actually like to do sexually later on. In many ways, there is no innocent intervention when it comes to sex. Sexuality is a kind of spongy life force: it absorbs all information, good and bad, it becomes saturated even by the material it is supposed to repel, and in fact, the presumably repellant material just becomes the foundation for other, more resilient, modes of desire. Levine, by asking impertinent questions about children and sex—like, Why label a child a victim if she doesn’t feel victimized? or, Why presume that all sexual conduct between adults and children is unwanted by the child or that all sexual activity among kids under the age of ten is pernicious?—has pushed back on one version of feminism that sees women and girls perpetually as the victims of unchecked male sexual aggression, and has pushed forward with another that understands children as sexual, parents as erotic figures, and sexuality itself as the pursuit of pleasure.

By casting “harm” in terms of the judgments adults pass about child sexuality rather than in terms of exposure to inappropriate material, Levine went gaga and began a much-needed public conversation about the folly of imposing sexual regulation on children and the wisdom of making more-neutral assessments about what children want. Indeed, Levine proposed, when we really don’t know or understand what children want or how they may feel about something, we could always do something wacky and crazy ... like asking them to let us know what feels good and what feels intrusive or wrong.

So, while child sexuality is denied, male sexuality encouraged, female sexuality repressed, and religious leaders are given free hand with the legislation of desire, gaga feminism proposes to join forces with the kind of sexual liberation proposed by Judith Levine and Gayle Rubin before her. If we can figure out how to stop policing children’s sexuality, we might also be closer to understanding how to disrupt the transmission of moralistic and inadequate narratives of sex, love, and marriage from one generation to the next. Rubin showed us how female passivity and sexual submission actually carried over from precapitalist societies to industrial capitalist ones. But the lingering question is why so little changes in the male-female dynamic when so much else ebbs and flows around it. As we go from analog to digital, from local to global, from proximity

to virtuality, from community to social network, how is it that we can shift and alter our perceptions of so many of the building blocks of social life but we still cling to practically nineteenth-century notions of the intimate, the domestic, and the private? Now, I am not at all saying that nothing has changed or that marriage cultures are the same now as they ever were; obviously we can chart massive shifts in the meaning of sexual contact as we move from, say, personal ads to online dating services. And we can also see that notions of friendship, coupledness, and even family have shifted somewhat to accommodate the collisions of personal and remote, private and public that occur on millions of computer screens every night around the world. And yet ... and yet, as we entered a new century, mobile devices firmly in hand, we did not choose to dial up a brand-new world of connection, instead we began to ask whether we could expand the old world of marriage to accommodate more people and whether we could extend the old notion of family to include more and more intricate relations. This is akin to old episodes of Star Trek, in which we are seen to have traveled years and miles from earth, we are in completely new solar systems, and yet, when aliens appear, they still take the form of men and women and follow heterosexual modes of intimacy. A few wavy lines on the forehead or an extra nose or something signals difference, but the actual scripting of human

sexual relations is left completely untouched.

A few illustrations of the way the persistence of old models of gender hampers the development of new ones might be helpful here. In mainstream cinema, the representation of heterosexual romance seems hardly to change at all despite massive changes in the real world. Just as little girls are sold extremely manipulative narratives about princesses and unicorns at age five (or they get “eaten” by Cinderella, as the title of Peggy Orenstein’s 2011 book has it),<sup>10</sup> by age fifteen, they are offered the “chick flick” by way of compensation for the disappointments that are sure to follow from the realizations that the childhood narratives about romantic trysts, cuddly babies, and cute puppies are about to be replaced by cheating, marriage-averse guys, the trauma of childbirth, and dog poop. (I jest, but you get the point about the distance between princes and husbands, dolls and babies, stuffed animals and animals that shit all over your carpet ... right?)

Whoever currently writes romantic comedies, or at least whoever writes the ones not written by Nora Ephron (You’ve Got Mail, Sleepless in Seattle, When Harry Met Sally, and so on)—and it really seems to be one person or one committee of mediocre screenplay writers, given the uniformity of the genre (think Something about Mary, Pretty Woman, Runaway Bride, The Proposal, Sweet Home Alabama, The Break-



Up, Wedding Crashers and the list goes on)—must think that (a) men and women do not really like each other but (b) they really want to get together, and (c) there is no point in getting together unless you first have a huge obstacle standing between you and your object of desire (examples: his parents, her parents, his girlfriend, her dog, his commitment phobia, her biological clock, his homosexuality, her obsession with weddings, his virginity—yes, his, think about it for a minute ... Steve Carell, Catherine Keener ... you got it! —Russell Brand, age differences, his job, her ambition, her looks, her memory loss, and so on and so forth). In fact, given how much of early life for heterosexuals involves subtle and less subtle nudges to get a mate, settle down, get married, it is kind of bewildering to see how the romantic comedy wants to, needs to, has to produce obstacles in order to make love seem hard won, worthwhile, and, well, romantic.

Romance, it seems, loves an obstacle (“The course of true love never did run smooth” as the Bard once said, prescriptively I think, rather than descriptively, given how much mileage Shakespearean comedies themselves gain out of obstacles to the marriage of the principals). For gay people, of course, obstacles are the name of the game, and they abound in the form of sanctioned and unsanctioned homophobia (You can’t do that!); sexual curiosity (Why do you want to do that?); outrage (That’s illegal! Please don’t do that!); and

disgust (Oh, must you? And in public?). But for straight people, the obstacles to true love must be created, crafted, nurtured, and then quickly discarded as soon as an hour and twenty minutes of fun has been had by all. And so a lover's family suddenly accepts the fiancé they had so quickly rejected; a lover's child finally comes around and accepts the new mate; the lover moves from the wrong love object (homosexual, superficial, commitment phobic, fantastically good-looking, or all of the above) to the right love object (putatively heterosexual, deep, caring, pretty good-looking, steady) and the rest, as they say, is history. Or, at least, the rest is Hollywood.

I will return to the recent bumper crop of romantic comedies focused on marriage (Bride Wars, Bridesmaids, He's Just Not That Into You) in [chapter 4](#), and there we will also look at the romantic comedies' masculine other: the bromance. But, meanwhile, there is another new genre of films that attempts to fold itself around the new forms of white middle-class heterosexuality. While these films simply settle for the idea that when it comes to heterosexuality, the more things change, the more they stay the same, gaga feminism sees these changes as opportunities for new understandings of gendered intimacy, other versions of gendered desire, and wants to take advantage of the instability of heterosexuality, an instability born of a brave new world made up of abundantly competent

women and totally incompetent men. The new genre of films that tries to make sense of this new development and contain its wild potential focuses upon redundant masculinities, and tries to recycle these useless models while building up heroic narratives around them. This genre, mumblecore, as it has been named, was represented in mainstream cinema by the 2010 film *Cyrus*, but it encompasses a whole set of both mainstream and indie films, all of which imagine themselves to be showcasing alternative masculinities while in fact they are just trying to rescue an anachronistic masculinity from the trash heap of history. In the 2009 film *Humpday*, two buddies decide to make a porno movie together while their wives/girlfriends are working real jobs. In an earlier and high-end version of mumblecore, *Little Children* (directed by Todd Field, 2006), gorgeous and talented women (played by Kate Winslet and Jennifer Connelly) are married to underachieving men who let their wives work while they pine over their lost youth or cruise the Internet for porn.

The genre is rounded out by the Judd Apatow factory of films featuring Neanderthal males and fine women, *Knocked Up* being the obvious example. In Apatow's world, sad and nerdy, out-of-shape men successfully cruise successful and ambitious beautiful women. True love, these films now tell us, can bring a lovely lady to see the charm of a crusty loser; it can allow a go-getter

femme to ignore the complete lack of ambition of her geeky partner; true love lets losers win ... as long as they are male. There is no possibility of the reverse situation becoming the foundation of romance—no lady nerds without jobs or good looks can expect Prince Charming to show up any time soon. And while women in these films, like high school students preparing for a competitive college application, pad their resumes with good works, yoga classes, advanced degrees, high salaries, and lots of know-how, their schlubby partners-to-be rest secure in the knowledge that they may not have a job, they may have no prospects of a job any time soon, they may lack good hygiene, tell few jokes, show little to no initiative, but, heterosexual love being what it is, and given the market's tilt toward male eligibility, as long as the guy has a semifunctional penis, and sometimes even if he doesn't, he will get laid!

Let's look more closely at one example of mumblecore to see what we are dealing with here. *Cyrus*—or *Oedipus Wrecks*—is a wretchedly weird film in which Marisa Tomei is romanced by the singularly unappealing John C. Reilly only to be thwarted in her sexual escapades when her twentysomething son, played creepily by Jonah Hill, expresses his Oedipal objections to the match. In a romantic comedy with few jokes, little romance, and a massive “ick” factor (the romantic leads meet as the man is peeing on a

rosebush and his partner-to-be thinks it is cute!), so little was appealing about the film that reviewers tried to rescue it by inventing a new genre to explain this and other navel-gazing not-very-funny rom-com, sex-with-mom, ho-hum films—thus, mumblecore.

What these films really do is grapple unsuccessfully with many of the changes that I am charting here: when the women get smart, these films show the men riding her coattails; when the women get fed up, the films show the men playing the spinster card and reminding the women that society abhors an unmarried female. And so, if white heterosexual women become more competent, more powerful, and better paid, what happens, these films ask, to white heterosexual men who, in the past, got a lot of mileage out of being the providers, the workers, the members of the partnership who knew how to do stuff? Well, the mumblecore films provide an answer: If women become more competent, then men are relieved of their obligations to be efficient and productive. If the woman is earning well, then maybe the man can take a long break. If she can manage the household, the kids, the banking, the shopping, and their sex life, then maybe he should just kick back, put his feet up, and wait for her to tell him what to do.

Mumblecore films provide a justification for a new form of parasitical masculinity that I like to call “angler” masculinity, after the anglerfish. For those

who have not read up on these crafty little creatures, male anglerfish are much smaller than the females; they can only survive by attaching to the larger female, fusing with her and mating with her. She then spawns eggs and baby fish ... and her mate? He hangs on for dear life and feeds when she feeds. The mumblecore/angler male films by the Duplass brothers (Cyrus), Andrew Bujalski (Funny Ha Ha), but also inspired by Judd Apatow (Knocked Up) give this angler guy meaning—yes, he may be a loser, may lack a job, a purpose in life, ambition, charm, likeable qualities, this may all be true, but mumblecore imagines beautiful women throwing themselves at these men not despite their shortcomings but because of them. If there weren't plenty of evidence in the real world for this phenomenon of smart women/slacker men couplings, mumblecore would be truly offensive. In fact, when *Knocked Up* came out in 2007, articles began appearing in the press about slacker dude/high-ambition lady couplings. One such article in the *SF Weekly*, for example, titled "Slacker Guys and Striver Girls," looked at real-life versions of the mismatched pairs of ambitious women and stoner guys.<sup>11</sup> The article came to the conclusion that the slacker's days were done, because many of the women interviewed had moved on from stoner boneheads to career guys, but looking around the tabloids and seeing all the stories of famous women like Sandra Bullock and

Jennifer Aniston who go out with lazy guys who cheat on them, one suspects that the slacker dude has at least one more generation to go before he gets phased out along with the model of heterosexuality that invests in the idea that any guy who will marry you is marriage material.

Basically, the mumblecore films expose a deeply troubling component of the new heterosexualities described here—namely, that there is no point blaming men alone for the breakdown in the functionality of heterosexuality. Women carry a large amount of responsibility for what heterosexuality has become, and whether they are desperate housewives complaining about male perfidy or newly divorced women bemoaning the lack of single men their age or young women who are quickly lured by men twice their age into sexual relations with financial benefits, or even if they are women who dislike women, mean girls who punish other girls to punish themselves, or women who “masquerade” (in the psychoanalytic terminology) or pose as incompetent in order to make their incompetent partners feel better about themselves, however you play it, women are as much to blame for the sad state of affairs that we call heterosexual romance as men.

This is not to make an antifeminist argument about women being the real problem or women needing to shape up; it is, rather, a “face the music” kind of

statement about the fact that gender hierarchies persist, at least in part, because women perpetuate them and have learned how to benefit from them. 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. And this form of feminism actually imagines that men as well as women will feel liberated by the possibilities that the end of heterosexuality and the end of normal create.

But ... what if we incorporate all the macro changes that we have experienced in a few short decades into the everyday? What if we start noticing that the families in which children grow up are far different from the families in which many of us were raised, and that those changes have often been for the better? The claustrophobia of the nuclear family was formerly only alleviated by more family, extended family, by cousins and aunts and uncles and grandparents. But now, children are apt to have many adults in their life, adults, moreover, to whom they are not even related. Of course, the expansion of the tight family circle to include nonbiologically related others has raised a kind of hysteria about pedophilia such that our freeways are littered with electronic notices about “child abduction,” and milk cartons bear the sad visages of missing children. These children are often disgruntled youth who have run as far away as possible from their



abusive family households, or children who have been abducted by a parent in a custody battle; only much more rarely is the child a victim of stranger abduction. More often than we think, it is the family, and not the outside world, that is the danger zone for kids. What would happen if we actually began to incorporate this version of the family into our mainstream representations?

Now, of course, there are families and “families” in the USA, and when people talk about “saving the family” or “protecting the family” or “investing in family,” they generally have a white middle-class family in mind. Few of the models of the family used in mainstream politics to argue for this or against that (for stay-at-home moms; against abortion, for example) envision a black family as the family that must be saved from the breakdown of traditional gender roles or the manipulation of reproductive potential. The black family in particular has a vexed history in the United States, as so many scholars have commented, precisely because it was decimated both by slavery and by the Jim Crow period that followed.

The black family nowadays is often represented in the media as more conservative, more homophobic, but also more broken, more divided, and more perverse than any other. When gay marriage was voted down in California in the 2008 elections, for example, black voters were supposedly to blame, and the media

engineered a standoff between white gay-marriage supporters and black straight-marriage defenders. Subsequent studies showed that the influence of black voters in relation to the defeat of the move to overturn Proposition 8 had been greatly exaggerated, and that black voters, even religious black voters, are much more concerned with social justice issues than with “family values”: they may oppose gay marriage but not go out of their way to vote against it. In a 2011 article in *The Root*, for example, journalist David Kaufman reminded readers: “Focused far more on job creation, health care and education than on gay marriage, black voters aren’t supporting conservative candidates simply because they oppose LGBT rights. Instead, they are voting for progressive pro-LGBT candidates—despite disagreeing with their pro-LGBT platforms” (emphasis in original).<sup>12</sup>

The divided black family has long been the target of American sociologists, as scholar Roderick Ferguson documents in his book *Aberrations in Black*.<sup>13</sup> Cast by sociologists and public-policy makers in the 1960s as the root cause of black poverty, the black household has been caricatured in terms of all that supposedly goes wrong when fathers are absent and mothers are too present. The myth of the powerful black matriarch and the delinquent dad has covered over the reality of the struggling single mother and the incarcerated father. Rather than looking at the reasons that so many

black households struggle, conservative family discourse has chosen the easy route of blaming poverty and destitution on the breaking up of the family rather than recognizing the broken black family as part of the long arc of slavery and its aftermath.

In terms of black gay and lesbian households, queer sociologist Mignon Moore's book *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood among Black Women*,<sup>14</sup> has shown that black gays and lesbians tend to follow many of the same patterns as heterosexual black parents and are often much more concerned with the consequences of racism and class politics than with marriage equality.

So, for all kinds of people across many different ethnicities in the United States, the family, feminism, and sex/gender norms need a major update. Gaga feminism to the rescue! Now, I am not saying that the new feminism I outline here, a feminism that recognizes multiple genders, that contributes to the collapse of our current sex-gender systems, a feminism less concerned with the equality of men and women and more interested in the abolition of these terms as such, I am not saying that gaga feminism will save anyone, or rescue any outmoded social form from total redundancy, but, in a mode of frivolity and because, for many feminists, there is really nothing left to lose, some kind of political project, whimsical or otherwise, seems to be in order. So 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.

I am sure you are now wondering—can anyone be a gaga feminist? The short answer is—yes! The long answer is—no. Technically speaking, anyone can be a gaga feminist, but practically speaking, many people will not want to be. Gaga feminism, after all, wants to incite people to go gaga, to give up on the tried and the true, the real and the authentic, the proven and the tested, and instead encourages a move toward the insane, the preposterous, the intellectually loony and giddy, hallucinatory visions of alternative futures.

Gaga feminism is not something to which you will subscribe; you will not sign up for it, you will not vote for it. Instead, it is something you will do, something you can practice, something to be. And by the way, contrary to Lady Gaga's own manifesto, you will not be born a gaga feminist, "Born This Way," you will, to quote an earlier gaga feminist, Simone de Beauvoir, become one. 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. Gaga feminism is a gender politics that recognizes the ways in which our ideas of the normal or the acceptable depend completely upon racial and class-

based assumptions about the right and the true; gaga feminism will abandon the norm the way a hiker might throw out her compass—once the compass has been lost, every direction is right, every path seems attractive, and getting lost becomes both a possibility and a pleasure. Think of gaga feminism in the same way that Lady Gaga thinks of clothes—not as functional and utilitarian but as utopian and visionary. When Lady Gaga wears a meat dress or five-inch heels, she does so to call attention to the whimsy of personhood, the ways in which we all need to see each other anew, find new surfaces, name those surfaces differently, and confuse the relations between surface and depth.

Obviously any movement that calls itself “feminist” must assume some privileged relation to the category of “woman,” and gaga feminism is not different in that respect. But what I mean by “woman” in this book will always be subject to contextual definitions. And gaga feminism may begin with questions of concern to bodies gendered as female, but it ends by recognizing that gender concerns all bodies, all genders, and a new gaga gender politics requires a thorough recalibration of the ways in which we know, recognize, and value each other’s genders, desires, and embodiments.

If I had to lay out some basic principles of gaga feminism, a few rules to guide you as you contemplate this new, gaga wave of feminist frenzy, they might

look something like this:

1. Wisdom lies in the unexpected and the unanticipated—to recognize new forms of politics, social structures, and personhood, we really have to take some big leaps into the unknown. Going gaga means letting go of many of your most basic assumptions about people, bodies, and desires.

2. Transformation is inevitable, but don't look for the evidence of change in the everyday; look around, look on the peripheries, the margins, and there you will see its impact. Let me explain—as every good baseball fan knows, when a player hits a long ball, you cannot tell if it is a home run by following the arc of the ball itself. You have to look into the stands and see whether the fans are on their feet waiting to catch the fly ball or whether they are seated and following the ball's flight into a well-placed glove. In other words, don't watch the ball, watch the crowd.

3. Think counterintuitively, act accordingly. A lot of what we learn as “common sense” actually makes no sense, especially as change does happen in complex societies such as the ones we inhabit. The notion that parents should “stay together for the children,” for example, makes no sense when that entails having

children live under the same roof as parents who hate each other. The idea that divorce is a terrible thing and that kids need two parents, one male and one female, preferably living together, is also debatable. Many kids now grow up in divided households, and they experience that division as a kind of liberation from nuclearity. When things are not going too well in one household, they can take refuge in the other. When dynamics get difficult with one set of parents, they can take a break with the other. What is intuitive for one generation becomes an obstacle to change for the next. Nothing lasts forever, and common sense needs to twist and turn in the winds of change.

4. Practice creative nonbelieving. I know it is not fashionable nowadays to be antireligious. We have reached a kind of “live and let live” sensibility when it comes to religiosity and spirituality and all that stuff. But when it comes to gender norms and sexual mores, religion really is the root of all evil, and that cuts across many religions. This is a bit of a problem for a branch of feminism that calls itself gaga feminism and takes Lady Gaga as a kind of mascot. She is, of course, like Madonna, thoroughly saturated in Catholic imagery and narratives of sacrifice, virgin/whore oppositions, and Judas-like betrayals. All the more reason, then, for this feminist, this gaga feminist, to flag some of the differences between Lady Gaga and

gaga feminism from the get-go—religion is a no-no and God has got to go-go. Christianity in particular has not been held properly accountable for all of the violence and misery that it has brought upon the world through its missions, morality, and miserable notions of salvation. As an anti-Christian doctrine, gaga feminism will not be your salvation, it will not save you or redeem you, it will not forgive you for your sins, but instead it encourages you to be a nonbeliever, and to keep your spiritual beliefs to yourself.

5. Finally, gaga feminism is outrageous. This is not a feminism for the faint of heart nor for the weak of knees ... this is a feminism that has no truck with shame or embarrassment, it is for the freaks and geeks, the losers and failures, the kids who were left out at school, the adults who still don't fit in. This is not a new social networking tool, nor a way to win friends and influence people. Gaga feminism is impolite, abrupt, abrasive, and bold. To be a feminist, you have to go gaga!

No, but seriously, folks, gaga feminism will not give you rules, will not lead you to the promised land. It may not even make your life better. But gaga feminism exists already in small random acts by gaga people who are improvising revolution right now in ways that may startle you into a new awareness of the change



that is happening all around. This feminism is not about sisterhood, motherhood, sorority, or even women. It is about shifting, changing, morphing, extemporizing political positions quickly and effectively to keep up with the multimedia environments in which we all live and to stay apace of what some have called “the coming insurrection.” Here and now, our reality is being rescripted, reshot, reimagined, and if you don’t go gaga soon, you may wake up and find that you have missed the future and become the past.

## One: Gaga Feminism for Beginners

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