

# Failing to Fall: A Response to Harri Kalha

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While reading Harri Kalha's delightful paean to Lee Edelman, a mischievous essay titled "We All Fall (In Love): Socializing with the Anti-Social", I found myself by turns entertained, exasperated, perplexed and piqued. The essay, a stylish account of queer theory's anti-social turn and a beautiful homage to one of its key practitioners, Harri Kalha takes on the role of defending the anti-social and Edelman from what he sees as mis-readings and clumsy attempts to rein in the *jouissance* and rain on the party. The feminist killjoy of note in this party is yours truly and I am variously cast in the essay as a flat-footed realist (my words), a speed-reading assassin, an anti-gay chauvinist, a butch redeemer (his words); I am also unsociable, unqueer, a roughneck among peacocks, a dyke among the dandies, a butch trying hard to be one of the boys, a bully, a "belly-buster" and basically a bull-dagger!

To which I plead – guilty as charged! Since Kalha and I seem doomed to play out our stereo-typical roles here – he the clever, punning queen, all talk and no substance, a Broadway musical lyric for every turn and a commitment to the aesthetic above all; me the grumpy lesbian who cannot take a joke and is just too preoccupied with politics to see that it is all just about style – let me try to depart from my role for a minute, put down my Valerie Solanas weaponry and change my Rosie the Riveter can-do, action oriented rhetoric for some old-fashioned intellectual exchange.

To Kalha, for starters, I want to say thank you for the spirit of this essay. I appreciate greatly the play with words, with lyrics, with signification and I am grateful to you for being funny, witty and charming in a genre that is all

to often laden with leaden prose. I thank you also for explaining beautifully both the anti-social turn in the queer theory and the different forms of negativity that are housed there. Thank you for engaging my work, for reading it, for trying to draw out the contradictions and to smooth its rough edges; and, for recognizing what might be at stake for me in the critique of canonical archives, the defense of the political and the ambivalence towards a "no future" stance that is queer and anti-reproductive rather than punk and anti-authoritarian. I am also sure that many readers will be excited to have this clear and unabashedly adoring framing of Edelman's work and even more readers will be stunned to find all those queer meanings hiding out in the double entendres in Cole Porter's lyrics (kidding...).

But I also want to say this: polemics are polemics. They are not supposed to be universally accepted; they have a "for and against" quality to them and a take no-prisoners attitude. While Kalha revels in these aspects of Edelman's writing, which he calls "writerly" and "fierce" all at once, he recoils when he finds similar rhetorical moves in mine. When Edelman says "fuck the poor innocent kid on the net", we know that he is striking a pose, building an argument, bashing back. But when I say that the gay male canon may need to be expanded beyond the usual suspects, when I draw attention to the negativity that has been crucial all along to certain forms of radical feminism such as those espoused by Valerie Solanas among others, my "negativity...oddly morphs into noxious condemnation". While the gay male critique and canon is riddled with irony, subtle humor, double entendres, ambiguity, apparently the lesbian canon is stolid and practical,

literal, hateful and weighty. While the groom in the Cole Porter lyrics “goes boom” and while birds and bees, babies and wags, brokers and blonds all do it, there are always the “Old Maids” in the background “who object” and who kvetch, but who do also, eventually, we are told “fall”. Or do they?

According to Sara Ahmed, the “promise of happiness” requires high levels of conformity and acquiescence and those figures who disrupt social fantasies of happiness – queers, feminists and antiracists – are accused of killing the joy of others, disrupting their ability to be happy by performing negativity across and through the social landscapes that have been designed for ease and pleasure. Ahmed writes: “Feminists are typically represented as grumpy and humorless, often as a way of protecting the right to certain forms of social bonding or of holding on to whatever is perceived to be under threat” (65). In other words, “The Old Maids”, the spinsters, the killjoys, the grumpy sourpusses, the dried out, bitter, cold, frigid, unfunny feminists are just spoiling things for everyone else and if only they would stop!! Of course, my work in no way falls into the category of humorless critique – given my archive of goofy cartoons and the revelry in *The Queer Art of Failure* in the superficial and the oddball, it would be hard to pigeon hole me as the grim realist, the stolid ideologue trudging through the argument and beating my readers over the head with it. So, why am I cast as the fly in the ointment then?

To be fair, Kalha is not simply calling me a killjoy, although he definitely implies that this is my function in getting in the way of some good old-fashioned male jouissance. Harri is asking for more subtlety from me in my positions, less man-hating, more solidarity. And so, let me try to soften my polemic or at least explain what is at stake for me in wondering about links between homosexuality and fascism, insisting on a political component to negativity and wanting to find some kind of feminism in the gay male embrace of castration.

First then, the thesis on homosexuality and fascism which I elaborate mostly in the penultimate chapter on *The Queer Art of Failure* has as its goal a re-articulation of gay and lesbian history that strives, in the spirit of Edelman and Bersani and others to be less committed to redemptive narratives about gay and lesbian heroes and heroines who are always on the right side of history. This anti-redemptive narrative is resigned to the complexity of minority histories, their tendency to slide at certain times and places into complicity and the ever-present possibility that elites of any sexual persuasion will work to advance their class interests over and beyond making common alliance with groups and individuals who may have bigger political goals in mind.

While I pursue the connection between gay men and Nazism in *The Queer Art of Failure*, I also recognize in other work the clear current of what Erin Carlson has called “Sapphic fascism”. In other words, I do not absent lesbians from this complicit and tangled history. I know from my own research, and from the research of historians such as Marti Lybeck, that lesbianism was a complicated category in the Nazi years and German lesbians did not share a single fate – some were rounded up as anti-socials (an interesting historical antecedent of this term), others as Jews and still others thrived in Nazi Germany. In Marti Lybeck’s forthcoming study, for example, *Gender, Sexuality and Belonging: Female Homosexuality in Germany, 1890–1933*, she tells us that once the Nazi government began to crack down on lesbian and gay life in Germany in 1933, the fates of the women Lybeck tracks as a community become radically different. While one woman was sent to a concentration camp for while, and while Jewish lesbians tried to leave Germany altogether to escape the persecution they now faced as Jews, others pledged their loyalty to the state.

The fact that many gays and lesbians were sent to camps in the 1930’s and 1940’s does not excuse the other gays and lesbians who may have

enthusiastically signed on to the new fascist regime. And the reason that these Nazi sympathizers might interest us is because their histories reveal the ways in which mass movements draw upon the sympathies of even those whom the movement rejects and persecutes. But these histories are also important to us for the insight they provide into contemporary spectacles of female militant nationalism. The images that circulated of torture at Abu Grahیب, for example, depended heavily upon the participation of female soldiers, and while many who saw these photographs proclaimed themselves to be shocked by the proximity of women to such wonton acts of violence, the histories of complicity that we have ignored supply the context to make sense of them.

So, my aim is not to excoriate gay men as a group but to remind us all that group histories are marked by complicity as well as victimization, cowardice as well as heroism, conformity as well as resistance.

As far as my other topics go, the politics of negativity and the feminist potential of the embrace of castration, well, again, there are many different ways to understand social negativity – there is the punk queer sensibility of a David Wojnarowicz and there is the insouciant sigh of the queen who just can't be bothered. Negativity is part and parcel of the life of a misanthrope like Patricia Highsmith who, when asked to name her favorite thing in the world quipped: "When someone invites you to dinner and then calls at the last minute to cancel and you realize with joy that you do not have to go!" But negativity is also the weary reality of the poor, the overworked, the misused and abused. I recognize that negativity and the queer negativity with which Edelman works are not the same thing. And that the role of negativity in Lacanian logic is quite different from the punk negativity that I explore in my counter-archives or that Tavia Nyong'o theorizes in his work on punk, queerness and race. The difference between various theories of negativity may have to do with how we understand

prohibition – Edelman sometimes seems committed to a Lacanian universe where every prohibition is obeyed and where desire never departs from the structures that holds it in place. My work however always looks for the exit sign, the escape routes, the small openings that appear when you stretch the fabric of the social to its breaking point.

Kalha ends his lovesong to Lee Edelman with one last Cole Porter lyric, this time from *Kiss Me Kate*, a version of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. The lyric allows Kalha to offer as a closing barb, the reminder that whether it is Hitchcock or Solanas, Genet or Highsmith, Lacan or Sid Vicious, we are all wedded to our canons and he implies that it is shrewish to bash the canon of some other group, to disdain texts to which others may be very attached. Not that he has not dabbled in his own forms of disdain however: for him, my approval of Valerie Solanas' hilarious SCUM Manifesto gives me a cover for saying "hurtful and hateful" things about men, gay and straight. Like Solanas, he suggests, I am casting all gay men as "patriarchal garbage". Not seeing the humor in Solanas's modest proposal, you would think that Kalha must have similar objections then to any project that made common cause with the hateful projections of Alfred Hitchcock's films onto women. Just as Solanas saw men as "walking dildos", surely we could say that Hitchcock films, which really do dissect the slicing and dicing of female flesh, see women as prone vaginas. And yet, he applauds Edelman's queer readings of the all too straight Hitchcock canon and sees them as "playing havoc with the archive". Similarly, he is annoyed that I "project the zero onto white gay men" even though the "zero" is precisely what the embrace of castration leads to. If you want to embrace castration, self-shattering, unbecoming and all those messy negative modes of being that Edelman and Bersani claim, then, guess what, you don't end up singing Cole Porter ditties in the shower – you are more likely to be the body at the sharp end of a Norman Bates wielded knife and to find yourself not only reduced to a zero but decimated in the process. "Woman", in Lacanian terms, is the

zero of being, she represents the zero towards which all being tends, the lack which defines all bodies, the unbecoming that consumes the body during the jouissance chased by Kalha, Edelman and others.

So, where does this leave us? Bloodied and broken? At odds and ends? Is the cat on the table yet? On behalf of a less traumatic conclusion, let me make Kalha a peace offering: Lady Gaga! A gay icon, if ever there was one, I have built my new model of feminism around her and I offer Kalha a copy of my *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal* – See you in Helsinki!

## References

- Ahmed**, Sara 2011: *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press.
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