

Professor Goes Gaga: Teaching Lady Gaga and the Sociology of Fame

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Abstract This paper presents an account of the conditions and consequences of a university-level teaching experience in the sociology of fame centered on the case of Lady Gaga. When the course “Lady Gaga and the Sociology of the Fame” at the University of South Carolina was announced in the autumn of 2010, it became the number-one Lady Gaga news story, reported and discussed in a wide variety of internet sources and media outlets across the world. The unprecedented attention devoted to the course placed its instructor in an unexpected and unique position to experience various dimensions of contemporary celebrity culture while teaching on that very subject matter. This paper offers a sociological autobiography to discuss this experience as a manifestation of the reflexivity of social knowledge and the interplay between sociology and society.

Keywords Fame · Celebrity · Teaching · Lady Gaga · Autobiography

Introduction

In the social sciences and the humanities, celebrity and fame have in recent years increasingly become the subject of scholarly attention. In sociology this growing interest has already blossomed to the point that it has been discussed in terms of the development of a new specialty field (Ferris 2007). Besides an increase in relevant research, the sociology of fame and celebrity has also led to develop new teaching

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efforts. Examples include Charles Kurzman's graduate seminar on "Celebrity Status" at the University of North Carolina,¹ Jonathan Imber's undergraduate class on "Celebrity, Fame, and Fortune" at Wellesley College,² and Deena Weinstein's course on the "Sociology of Celebrity" at DePaul University.³ There are no doubt other such specialized courses besides more comprehensive ones that treat fame and celebrity within the broader contours of popular culture, in sociology and related disciplines alike.

It is within the perspective of the sociology of fame and celebrity that I have since the Spring of 2011 organized the course "Lady Gaga and the Sociology of the Fame" at the University of South Carolina. To date, the course has been taught on five occasions, including two summer terms and a class in the Fall 2012 semester that was restricted to students of the University's Honors College. My focus in this paper is not on the objectives or organization of the course as a matter in the sociology of teaching. Instead, I will describe the conditions and impact of the planning of the course and specifically reveal how it became the most talked about sociology course in the popular media and one of the most discussed Lady Gaga news stories. The Lady Gaga course was evidently not the first sociological teaching activity in the realm of pop music to have received popular media attention (e.g., Adams 1998). Nonetheless, as I will here show, the popular attention bestowed on the Gaga course was unprecedented in scale and intensity. To avoid any misconception from the start, this attention could not possibly be the result of any academic accomplishment on the part of its instructor for it began to take shape well before the first class was even held.

The uniqueness of this experience in the teaching of sociology will justify the autobiographical nature of this paper. Besides the intrinsic merits of sociological autobiography, this account may be of dual significance for the scholarship on fame and celebrity. An analysis of my teaching experience on fame may have scholarly value for others with similar academic interests. Moreover, the circumstances of the Lady Gaga course exemplify a variety of sociological aspects of contemporary fame and celebrity and illustrate the reflexive character of sociological knowledge. Rather than merely focusing on the didactic aspects of the teaching of the Gaga course, therefore, the central focus of this paper is to uncover the conditions and consequences of how my sociology course on fame itself became a subject of fame.

Background

I first developed the idea for a course on Lady Gaga and fame in the Summer of 2010 as an attempt to reconnect with and further develop my interests in cultural sociology. In July 2010 I emailed my Department Chair that I wanted to teach a new course, 'Lady Gaga and the Sociology of the Fame,' mentioning that I was a fan of the singer's music but also that the course would focus distinctly on a sociological

¹ <http://kurzman.unc.edu/teaching/celebrity-status/>. Unless states otherwise, all weblinks cited in this paper were last accessed April 15, 2013.

² <http://www.wellesley.edu/Sociology/syllabi/SOC249%20F06.pdf>.

³ <http://condor.depaul.edu/dweinste/celeb/>.

analysis of the social conditions of the pop star's rise to fame. The Chair immediately responded that she thought it was "a great, great idea for a class." In September 2010, I prepared a provisional syllabus for the course, which was formally submitted for approval as a Topics in Sociology course under the title "SOCY 398D: Lady Gaga and the Sociology of the Fame." The request was swiftly approved by the Department Chair and the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

It will be useful to briefly detail the course objectives (Deflem 2012a). From when I first conceived of the idea for the course, I understood that putting the words 'Lady Gaga' in the title of a college course might have some unintended consequences as much as it could also attract students to the sociological study of fame. For that reason, the words 'sociology' and 'fame' were also included in the course title. As outlined in the syllabus, the course provides a sociological analysis of selected conditions of the fame of Lady Gaga.⁴ Relying on a non-reductionist notion of fame as an aspect of culture, the course is not about the music of Lady Gaga, but instead focuses on an analysis of the societal contexts of her rise to fame, including such issues as marketing, fans and live shows, and sex and gender. Thus, it is not a course in Lady Gaga but in sociology, and it is not a course about Lady Gaga but about the culture of fame as exemplified by the career of Lady Gaga.

Impact

Even with a distance of more than 2 years since the course was first organized, it is difficult to comprehensively report on the amount and kind of attention my course received in the media and elsewhere. At the time of this writing, an online search on Google for references to the course generates 334,000 results (April 15, 2013). Because some of these internet hits merely duplicate or link to other reports, the total number of references has varied since the course was announced. During the height of reporting on the course in the autumn of 2010, the total number of internet references exceeded 800,000. In any case, the volume of attention devoted to the course can safely be concluded to be unprecedented in sociology. The quantity in feedback to the course is matched by some striking qualitative characteristics as well.

News Media

Late September 2010, when the course was listed on the webpages of the USC Registrar in preparation for the Spring semester of 2011, I posted a webpage with details about the course on my university website. On October 1, 2010, I emailed USC Media Relations and a journalist of the *USC Times*, an internal publication at the University of South Carolina, about the course, assuming that it might generate some popular interest and provide a useful bridge between the university and the wider community. The email was passed on to *The Daily Gamecock*, the student newspaper at the university. Later that day, I received the first email from a student asking permission to take the class.

⁴ More details are provided on the course blog at: www.gagacourse.net.

On October 11, 2010, I registered the course blog gagacourse.net to provide an accessible overview of the course. Within days after the course webpage had been posted, I began to receive emails from interested students, among them a recent sociology Ph.D. and a high school student, both of whom I would eventually go on to collaborate with on related projects. On October 19, 2010, I conducted my first interview about the course for the *USC Times*, which later that day posted a news story on the University webpages (USC News 2010). “New sociology course on Lady Gaga provides ‘vacation’ from terrorism” and “Mid-Career Renewal” were the appropriate taglines to the story. Later that week, I did my second interview about the course with a student reporter from the *Daily Gamecock*, and USC Media Relations circulated the article prepared for the *USC Times* as a University news release for the off-campus working press.

On October 28, 2010, the first published reports on my course began to appear, specifically an article in *The Daily Gamecock* (Fitzgerald 2010) and a blog posting by the *Washington Post* based on the USC press release (Johnson 2010). That day, I accepted additional requests for interviews from journalists of a local television station, a local newspaper, and a reporter of the *New York Times*. Later in the evening, the local television station aired a segment about my course,⁵ and, the following day, the main local paper in Columbia, South Carolina, and *The New York Times* printed articles and placed them online (Knich 2010; Seelye 2010).

Particularly because of the USC press release being picked up by the *Washington Post* and the article in the *New York Times*, news about my course then quickly traveled like wild-fire, far beyond any proportion I could have imagined. By October 31, I already emailed a colleague that the attention was “overwhelming.” By November 2, I had a standardized email response prepared that mentioned that I was “swamped” with requests and, in lieu of an interview, referred to information posted on the course blog. Selectively, I accepted interviews, especially with sources abroad, the first of which was with a reporter from the BBC, whose website soon featured a story about the course (BBC News 2010).

The news stories that were featured by the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the BBC got picked up by media outlets from all over the world, including a multitude of print publications as well as on radio, TV, and the internet. Within days, hundreds of stories were published and soon the total number of reports ran into the thousands. After an initial wave of attention in the first few weeks after the course had been announced, a second surge in the media coverage took place mid-November when a story for the French news agency Agence France-Presse was distributed as a press release available to journalists across the world (Carli 2010).

Continued news coverage on the course was partly shaped by certain reactions I was made aware of within my university. The day after the course was discussed in the local media and the *New York Times*, my Department Chair informed me that the Dean of Arts and Sciences had asked to tell me that the University had received some calls about the course. Apparently, these phone calls had come from members of the community who questioned the validity of the course. I was told that the Dean advised me not to speak anymore about the course to the media so that news about

⁵ Television reports on the course mentioned in this paper are available via my YouTube channel: <http://www.youtube.com/user/MathieuDeflem/videos>.

it would die down and I could go ahead and teach the course in the upcoming Spring semester. USC Media Relations likewise took efforts to suppress news about the course. The article posted online by USC News (2010) was never printed in the hard-copy edition of the *USC Times*. I was forced to decline a planned interview with a local TV station after I was told it could only take place with a representative of USC Media Relations present.

A few days after I had been advised not to speak to the media, the Department Chair called me to her office to tell me that I was now encouraged, at the recommendation of the Dean, to speak publicly about the course. Apparently, the volume of news coverage on the course had become so enormous that it was bringing world-wide publicity to the University. At a university faculty senate meeting around that time, the President of the University commented favorably about my course along with flattering comments about the University's baseball team. The University's Provost made an uninformed disparaging remark at the same meeting, but later congratulated me in person for having been discussed so widely that I had even been mentioned in a newspaper in his native Greece.

I rejected several requests for interviews because there had been some sensationalist accounts written that focused unnecessarily on my fandom of the music of Lady Gaga rather than my work as a sociologist. I rejected interviews from, amongst others, Fox and Friends and talk-radio stations. Late November 2010, I cautiously accepted some interview requests, for instance to appear on the Gayle King Show on XM Satellite Radio, on the MSNBC program *NewsNation* with Tamron Hall, and on several radio stations from my native country of Belgium, where I received special attention when it was discovered that the Gaga course in the United States was taught by a Belgian-born professor.⁶

Besides the *New York Times* and the BBC, other globally impactful news outlets discussing the course included CNN (which aired at least three segments about the course), MTV.com, *USA Today*, *Time* magazine, the popular British music publication *NME*, the trade magazine *Billboard*, and the French fashion magazine *Elle*. Print news stories appeared in nations as diverse as Russia, Slovenia, India, Vietnam, Zambia, Senegal, Lebanon, and Oman, to name but a few. Multiple television and radio shows broadcast features about the course as well. Via an online search, I discovered at least 20 television shows from across the world that devoted a segment to the course, including programs in France, Italy, Germany, and China. Radio reports were manifold as well and included broadcasts as wide-ranging as a local talk radio show in Ohio, a Christian radio station in the United Kingdom, and a live interview with the noted Irish rock journalist Dave Fanning. An interview with BBC Radio for a Lady Gaga special that was broadcast, appropriately or not, on Christmas Day of 2010 was not used.

Based on an online search of news stories discussing the course, it is safe to conclude that just about every newspaper, radio and TV station, and online media site with some interest in Lady Gaga, by means of a focus on celebrity or on music, has reported on the course. For several days in the first week of November 2010, news

⁶ The course blog gagacourse.net includes links to many of these online news stories as well as embedded video files of television reports on YouTube.

about my course was the top-featured Lady Gaga story on Google News, even beating out the popularity of Lady Gaga-inspired Halloween costumes that year.

Throughout the Spring 2011 semester, when I first taught the course, and for well over a year thereafter, I continued to get media requests to discuss the course, including a request from ABC to have the first class meeting taped for television broadcast, which I declined. Towards the end of the semester, I received additional requests to have a class meeting televised. First came a renewed request from ABC, but it received no follow-up. Then came a request from the popular NBC morning program *The Today Show* and then from the local student-run university news service. After consulting with my students, I agreed to both requests, but eventually neither television broadcast took place. Off and on, the course has stayed in the television spotlight until this day. As late as March 29, 2013, the course was used as a question on the popular television game show “Who Wants To Be a Millionaire.”

Internet and Email

Within weeks after news about the course had appeared, I could barely keep up posting links to whatever sources I found online on the course blog. Even breaking the sources down per language proved difficult as there were some reports in languages I could not even recognize. At some point, there appeared more than 60 online media sources on the course over a time span of just 12 hours in the Russian language alone. Towards the end of November 2010, the volume of news reports on my course was so great that my name appeared as a trending term in Google Trends. The course blog I had set up mid-October 2010 received some 800 views that month, a number that had risen to 40,000 by November (and that since has hovered between around 1,000 and 1,500 a month).

News about my course has been repeatedly discussed on social-networking sites, especially on blogs, Twitter, and Facebook. Tweets about the course occurred multiple times per day in the initial weeks when the course had been announced and have continued until the present, albeit at a gradually lower rate. Internet users have also been eagerly looking for information about the course, as indicated by the fact that automatic completions of partial Google searches include references to the course. In the Spring of 2011, the Google search “Lady Gaga a__” found the name of my course competing with the popular Lady Gaga song *Alejandro*. At the time of this writing in April 2013, “Lady Gaga and th__” has the course mentioned along with ‘the illuminati,’ ‘the occult,’ and ‘the Rolling Stones.’

Anonymous comments on various online forums and networking sites were manifold and mostly laudatory. By example, a YouTube fan video on the influence of Lady Gaga favorably mentions my class,⁷ while another video provides an introductory overview of my course in Korean.⁸ Negative online comments typically discussed my course as an example to lament the state of higher education, among them a YouTube clip under the title, “Univercity [sic] Teach Course on Illuminati Puppet Lady Gaga.”⁹

⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5semynWYqtg>

⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUFkgneNWFQ>

⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKd9sKr5YOM>

Most unanticipated on my part were the negative judgments that commented not on my teaching but on my fanship (e.g., Allen 2011). Explaining the course, I had in interviews revealed that I was a fan of Lady Gaga's music (and of popular music in general) precisely because I was concerned that students might not accept my teaching of a Lady Gaga course unless I could claim expertise as a sociologist as well as a connoisseur of the singer's music and career. But the media response was at times less articulate. In February 2012, in the midst of the Republican presidential primary, conservative commentator Ann Coulter (2012) lamented the state of higher education and mentioned my course as an example. A member of the Christian Parents Forum posted that my course indicated not only that "education in the States continues to plummet to new lows" but also that "Christ is coming soon."¹⁰ Another forum member agreed: "Yes he is sister!!! I can not wait!"

By November 16, 2010, I had received well over 800 emails about the course, the vast majority of which were positive and congratulatory. Just seven of these communications were viciously negative, vilifying me as a monster in a meaning of that term different than how it is used in the Lady Gaga fan community. One emailer said he was "embarrassed for America as a result of the absolutely ludicrous nonsense you are passing off as education," that I should undergo "psychological evaluation," and that "well educated Chinese, Indians, Europeans, etc.—and even the terrorists—are probably laughing their asses off." One email was passed on to the authorities for possibly involving a death threat, but no charges were filed.

In the physical world, too, I have often been confronted with feedback relating to the course. As I walked on campus during the days after news about the course had first appeared, more students than usual were looking at me, presumably because they recognized me from a picture that was printed on the front page of *The Daily Gamecock* student paper. One student recognized me on campus while she was reading an article about the course. Apart from the occasional 'Lady Gaga' having been yelled at me out on the street, some time in October 2010, as I was walking home, a driver stopped his truck in the middle of the road and leaned out of the window to make a sign of a cross pointed in my direction.

Students

Most communications about the course, especially by email, have come from students. Some of them came from students at USC who asked for permission to register for the class even though they did not meet the course prerequisites. One student included a picture of himself dressed up at a Lady Gaga show. Many other such requests were from students at other universities, several of them from foreign countries. Some students emailed me about their thesis projects and related educational interests. Intersecting with my fanship was the fact that such communications took place on Twitter, where I have an account relating to a Gaga fansite I privately maintain (@gagafrontrow), as well as via my personal and university email addresses. To this day, I receive a variety of Lady Gaga-related questions from students at various stages of their education. On a few occasions, such requests pertained not

¹⁰ <http://www.christianparentsforum.com/forums/showthread.php?t=4436>

to the sociology of Lady Gaga's fame, but involved attempts to solicit my help for a music student seeking to obtain success and fame as a professional singer.

Forming a special part of the student feedback are the responses the idea for the course received from students in the college press. Immediately upon the first report about the course in *The Daily Gamecock*, a student wrote a negative op-ed (Seidel 2010). A few students at other universities similarly condemned my teaching (e.g., Everett 2010). However, the vast majority of published student feedback was very positive. Especially noteworthy were the editorial endorsements in the college press, including student papers at Harvard University (The Harvard Crimson 2010) and the University of Pennsylvania (Edwards 2010).

Once student registration for the Spring 2011 term had begun in November 2010, the class filled up within a mere few hours. Limited to 50 students in its inaugural semester, some students dropped out before the first class was held, but their slots were immediately filled by others. On the first day of class, a few flyers with negative comments about the course had been posted in the building of the USC Sociology Department and some were anonymously delivered to me in my inbox in the Department's mailroom. The Department Chair at some point raised the possibility of having campus police present at the first class, but, partly because a sudden snow storm had led to the cancelation of all classes scheduled on the first day of the semester, this drastic measure proved unnecessary.

Shortly after the first class was held in the Spring of 2011, a report appeared in the *Huffington Post* written by one of the student participants (Griggs 2011). The article was used along with the feedback from another student in a story published in *The Daily Gamecock* under the headline, "Students Vouch for Gaga Class" (Quinn 2011). But the objectives of the course were not always well understood. Despite my more than usual clarity in describing the course objectives in the syllabus and during the first class meeting, 10 out of the 50 enrolled students eventually dropped the course. When the class was again offered during in the Fall of 2011, it attracted about the same number of students as during the inaugural term despite the class being open to 120 students. Apparently, word had gotten out that the class was not an 'easy-A.'¹¹

Sociologists

In contrast to the attention the course was given in various non-academic communities, it received virtually no response from sociologists. The exceptions are few and telling. The first feedback on the course I discovered from sociologists was on the ScatterPlot blog where a post by Jeremy Freese, the Chair of the Sociology Department at Northwestern University, generated a handful of comments.¹² Among them is the remark by Associate Professor of Sociology Andrew Perrin of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill that I would not have "any credentials whatsoever in the study of music or culture." The comment is obviously astounding because of its lack of professionalism, but also considering that cultural sociology

¹¹ Sadly revealing of certain realities of contemporary higher education, I was on two different occasions congratulated by members of the administration in my university for the Gaga course having failed to attract many students (Deflem 2013).

¹² "Starstruck," blog post. Scatterplot, October 29, 2010. <http://scatter.wordpress.com/2010/10/29/starstruck/>

was my initial specialty area when I studied sociology at the university before I became a student in cultural anthropology and subsequently turned to the sociology of law. An additional comment by Jay Livingston, the Chair of Sociology at Montclair State University, references a definition of the word ‘gaga’ that includes the adjectives “demented” and “crazy.”

In March 2011, I received a request from the American Sociological Association (ASA) to write about my course for the organization’s newsletter, an offer I declined because I have not been a member of the organization since January 2009. Unbeknownst to me at that time, two short notices about the course had been published in the newsletter without my permission (Footnotes 2010, 2011). The irony is not lost on me that I had left the Association primarily because it has turned into a politicized advocacy group that is mainly interested in publicity. For that reason, I also refused to write about the course for the ASA magazine *Contexts* and declined to organize a didactic seminar for the 2012 annual meeting in Denver on the suggested theme of “Teaching Lady Gaga and the Sociology of Fame.”

Lady Gaga

As an amusing consequence of the reflexivity of social knowledge, Lady Gaga has herself also publicly commented on my course about her fame. The first time the singer spoke about the course was during an interview with Anderson Cooper for the popular CBS television program “60 Minutes” (CBS News 2011). The singer claimed that she considered herself to be a “master in the art of fame” and a student of the “sociology of fame.” Using the expression ‘sociology of fame’ a second time during the interview, she mentions that Mr. Cooper had asked her about the matter. The reference to my course—also alluded to in the title of the piece (‘Lady Gaga and the Art of Fame’)—made sense because the interview was originally conducted in November 2010 when news about the course had gone global. To the delight of myself and my students, the interview aired during the inaugural semester of the course on the night of the Grammy Awards in February 2011.

In July 2011, Lady Gaga again spoke about the course when she was a guest on an AMP Radio talk show hosted by Carson Daly. Incidentally contributing to the fame of my course, Mr. Daly asked about the course under the impression that it was organized at USC in Los Angeles, from where the show airs, rather than the other USC in Columbia, South Carolina. Like before, the singer took the question as an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of fame. “Especially in today’s media with social networking and cameras,” she said, “everyone can take that same picture that the paparazzi used to take...It’s not so much about doing it as it is about embracing the art of it. And I think that’s what the course is about” (Costello 2011).

In one of the few interviews Lady Gaga has granted since the beginning of her Born This Way Ball tour in the spring of 2012, she was asked about the course for Eesti Televisioon in Estonia in August 2012.¹³ She said that she would not take the class herself “because”, she stated, “I would know everything that they were teaching,” but she did add that “it’s very nice of them that they have that class there.”

¹³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mxyn-C-HoCk>

In May 2011, during a press conference in Mexico when Lady Gaga was in that country for the final shows of the Monster Ball tour, she had also been asked about the course, but the available online reports of that interview do not include her comments. A few weeks after the interview, however, on May 25, 2011, Lady Gaga appeared as a guest on an episode of *Saturday Night Live* hosted by Justin Timberlake. In one of the sketches on the show, the two pop stars take part in a mock TV game quiz called “What’s That Name.”¹⁴ At some point during the sketch, the actor Fred Armisen appears on stage portraying the fictional character of ‘Alphonse,’ a fan of Lady Gaga. Much to my surprise and to the consternation of many of my friends, Alphonse was in appearance and dress modeled after me.

The Celebrity of Fame

It is difficult to estimate precisely the value of my teaching experience for other scholars studying and teaching on fame and celebrity. Perhaps, as one can assume to be the case with respect to the fame of Lady Gaga, not all too much can be learned from an experience that is so unique. Final judgment on the usefulness of my experience in any case rests with fellow instructors and how they wish to use or avoid elements thereof. Minimally, however, the case can serve as an occasion to raise issues pertinent to the analysis of fame in contemporary society as well as its relationship to the objectives of sociology, especially with respect to teaching.

It is most striking to note how my course on fame became a manifestation of its very subject matter. Since the course was announced, media reports on Lady Gaga have often continued to mention that the fame of the singer has reached such proportions that she even has her own college course. When the popular music television station Fuse TV in 2010 devoted an end-of-the-year segment to Lady Gaga, for instance, the course was mentioned as the first item of note to illustrate the singer’s spectacular rise to fame that year.¹⁵ When the French television station M6 aired an hour-long special on Lady Gaga on the occasion of her *Born This Way* Ball concert in Paris in September 2012, the course was discussed at some length, including video segments of some of my public lectures. On the occasion of the performer’s 27th birthday in 2013, a popular astrology blog again included the course as proof of the performer’s cultural relevance (Fox 2013).

No doubt a result of the fame of Lady Gaga but also aided by the fame of the Gaga course, other scholars have recently been taking up Gaga-related efforts in their teaching and research. Several higher education courses have been organized on various aspects of the phenomenon of Lady Gaga, including courses on the music and/or fame of Lady Gaga at Arizona State University (Murphy 2011), Tufts University (Hollands 2012), St. Catherine University (Oo 2011), and the University of Richmond (Brackett 2012).¹⁶ Some instructors, moreover, have placed the name of

¹⁴ A video of the sketch is on Hulu: <http://www.hulu.com/watch/243592>.

¹⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QjTCJDVL3wA>

¹⁶ The class on Lady Gaga at the University of Virginia that has been organized since the Fall of 2010 is not a self-standing course but one among many sections in the English class “Accelerated Academic Writing” (Tyson 2010). A course at the Harvard Business School uses the career of Lady Gaga as a case study (Nobel 2011).

Lady Gaga in the title of their courses as a convenient and attractive short-hand descriptor to discuss other issues, such as the women's studies course "Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, and Nicki Minaj: Gender and Spectacular Consumption" at the University of Maryland (Rosenwald 2012), a course on the history of beauty, "From Lady of Shalott to Lady Gaga: Beauty and Ugliness," at Wake Forest University, and a course on the history of pop music, "Elvis to Lady Gaga: American Pop Culture 1950–2010," at Saint Leo University (Genco 2012).

Besides the appearance of various Lady Gaga courses, there are also indications that there has been a more general increase in various other pop culture courses, a development that has at times been met with some consternation. My course on the fame Lady Gaga has in the media regularly been discussed in conjunction with other pop-culture courses on various themes (e.g., Conrad 2011; Khan 2012). Apart from the occasionally voiced opinion that such courses would indicate a disintegration of higher education, it is telling that they are all considered part of a concerted effort, when, in truth, the objectives and perspectives of pop-culture courses vary widely across disciplines and educational settings.

Besides the use of Lady Gaga in university teaching, the contemporary interest in fame and celebrity is further indicated by the fact that there have been more and more professors referencing the singer at various, more as well as less opportune times in their teaching. Based on searches on Twitter, for instance, I discovered that aspects of the career of Lady Gaga are routinely mentioned to illustrate some issue relevant to the teaching at hand, for instance as an example of some aspect of social movements on gay rights issues. More strikingly and indicative of a more general fascination with fame and pop culture, Lady Gaga is at times also used for reasons far removed from any concrete educational objectives, for instance by playing a Lady Gaga video while waiting for the results of a chemistry test.

Additionally indicative of an academic Lady Gaga effect, scholars in several disciplines have begun to use the singer as a theme in their research, leading to the first academic journal article (Corona 2011) and anthology (Gray 2012) devoted to her career and work. Lady Gaga is also featured by means of image and/or text as a subject matter at conferences and in a variety of academic writings, especially in textbooks. The impact of these efforts, including my own ongoing work (e.g., Deflem 2012b), can at the present time not be properly judged and will need additional scrutiny in the context of related efforts in the study of (popular) culture.

Finally, it is to be noted that the attention bestowed on the Lady Gaga sociology course has at times also extended to its instructor. Since the course was announced, I have been contacted by the media to address not only the course but also various other aspects of the fame of Lady Gaga as well as other, more or less closely related themes, such as interviews concerning Kim Kardashian, New Kids on the Block, and the concept of the diva. Some such media requests remain difficult to fathom. At some point in November 2010, I was contacted by a Swedish fashion magazine asking me about a photo shoot. When I responded that my interests concern the sociology of fame and that I know very little about the fashion of Lady Gaga, it turned out that the magazine wanted to do a photo shoot of me, not her. Of course, I accepted the offer, but alas, no shoot was eventually scheduled.

Exemplifying the intertwined nature of sociology and society, it is under circumstances of a celebrity culture to be expected that the sociologist of fame can share

some of the subject matter's joys and tribulations. My feelings on the matter are distinctly ambiguous, involving both a measure of agony as well as excitement. While I find it surprising as well as distinctly unpleasing to have had my work discredited for all the wrong reasons, I have also received recognition in unexpected places. At a conference on terrorism and security in Turkey in May 2011, a colleague from Israel stepped up to tell me I was famous in her country, not because of my scholarship on counterterrorism, but because of the Gaga course. While attending Lady Gaga concerts in Tokyo in May 2012, I was even more astonished when I met several Japanese fans who recognized me and knew about my course and who, referring to me as "*Gaga sensei*" ('Gaga professor'), asked me to pose for pictures and give autographs.

The Sociology of the Sociology of Fame

This narrative of the teaching of a sociology course on the fame of Lady Gaga has revealed relevant dimensions of the manner in which the mere planning of the course became a subject of fame through its discussion across multiple venues in the contemporary popular media landscape. To be sure, higher education courses about pop stars and various aspects of pop culture have existed for a while, but their conditions and impact are surely different today. The precise contours of these differences deserve more analysis than I can offer here, yet avoiding any impression that this effort in sociological autobiography would serve only narcissistic purposes, it will be useful to conclude by clarifying what I see as some important elements of the proper framework within which sociologists of fame and celebrity ought to situate their scholarly activities, especially their teaching. Minimally, such a framework ought to reflect on the role of the individual scholar and the social conditions and consequences of sociological work on fame and celebrity.

In terms of the location of the instructor, the public role I was thrown into by planning a course on Lady Gaga and fame is not that of the celebrity intellectual, discussed by Lewis Coser (1973), as the scholar who translates academic work in a pop version thereof towards a broad audience. When I announced the organization of the course, I had not yet published any research on which such a status could have been based. Instead, my public position involves some of the roles that sociologist Peter Adler (1984) identified in his research on fame and college athletics, where he became the subject of media attention while studying that very attention among his research subjects. My teaching on the fame of Lady Gaga entailed a similar experience with respect to the roles of expert and celebrity that have been accorded to me. Compared to such cases in the decades preceding the present, however, the attention the Gaga course and its instructor received in the popular media was unprecedented in intensity and scale as well as different in kind.

No doubt, the timing of the course will have been fortuitous as a more serious social event would likely have prevented something as banal as a new college course from attaining such notoriety. Yet, more importantly, as an aspect of, and not just a reflection on, the rise to fame of Lady Gaga, the course was able to rely on a technologically accelerated and culturally propelled obsession with celebrity and fame that characterizes the present time. As the intensity of the fascination with

Lady Gaga was sustained, so did the course remain a topic of popular media attention. The gradual decrease in interest over the past years can likewise be attributed to a certain exhaustion with the singer, whose fame has become a *fait-accompli*. Since early 2013, an even sharper decline in attention can be attributed to the fact that the singer had to undergo surgery and cancel her Born This Way Ball tour, effectively removing her, at least temporarily, from intense media scrutiny.

From the viewpoint of the sociology of fame, the Lady Gaga course is one indication that the Warholian days of a 15-minute fame are a thing of the past. In the age of celebrity, a university course on Lady Gaga proposed at the height of the singer's rise to fame might well be argued to have been more noteworthy had it remained unknown. Likewise dated, at least in empirical respects, are the analyses of fame and celebrity that have preceded the advent of the internet, the rise of reality TV, and the massive changes that have taken place in the music industry (e.g., Gamson 1994; Marshall 1997). The world of fame and celebrity today is very different than 10 years past, let alone two or three decades ago, with all due consequences for our research and teaching in the area. It is obviously a consequence of the instant communications era of blogs, Twitter, and other networking sites that it becomes more readily possible for a sociology course to turn into a global news story or for such curiosities to occur as somebody remarking that the course should be interpreted as a sign of the second advent and for the instructor to find out about it.

My approach to this teaching experience could not be further removed from those strategies that have been suggested by sociologists who, by reaching out to the media, seek to engage a variety of publics in a dialogue (Adams 1998). In the case of the Gaga course, I barely had any active part at all in engaging the public via the media in any kind of dialogue as I could only selectively partake in media appearances that were presented to me. I can also not claim much control over the direction news coverage took, to wit not only the misrepresentations of the course's educational objectives but also, regrettably or not, much of the positive feedback it generated as part of the fan adulation Lady Gaga has come to enjoy. Judging from online comments, the attention the Gaga course brought to the discipline of sociology has been even more dubious as the primary outcome seems to be that some Lady Gaga fans believe the singer would have taken a sociology of fame course in college in preparation of her career as an artist.

There is no reason to assume that as sociologists we can manipulate news coverage in the direction of our scholarly concerns. Although one can welcome the growing trend for sociological scholarship to be featured in the media, we must remain cautious about the implications thereof. Besides, against the idea that sociology's media presence should be considered part of our scholarship itself (Adams 1998), the norms of our discipline must remain guided by academic standards rather than an activist orientation or a quest for publicity (Deflem 2013). I therefore also question the value of a sociological specialty area on celebrity and fame unless its research and teaching are rooted in the theoretical tradition of a disciplinary framework, rather than being adrift in a field of so-called celebrity studies. It would be an unfortunate by-product of certain obsessions of our age were we to treat the culture of fame and celebrity more seriously than to acknowledge that it moves a great many people and that it for that reason alone can be analyzed sociologically.

Finally, with respect to the impact of the actual teaching of the Lady Gaga course in terms of the objectives I spelled out, the experience has been good but not wholly satisfying. My primary motivation in setting up the course was to have students learn about certain aspects of their society and, more ambitiously so, to draw them into the discipline of sociology by means of the analysis of a popular theme. By that standard, the course cannot be said to have been greatly successful, some noteworthy exceptions notwithstanding. The general interest level of university students today seems to be such that not even placing the words ‘Lady’ and ‘Gaga’ in the title of a course can greatly affect their motivations for learning. Apart from whatever shortcomings may rightly be attributed to the instructor, the impact of the course was surely also conditioned by some of the contemporary realities that characterize higher learning at a large state university. As such, it is most striking to note that the Gaga course has been very much like any other courses I have taught, particularly with respect to learning outcomes. Much like my other classes, also, the anonymous comments received via the University evaluation forms have generally been positive. A comment posted on a well-known privately maintained site of professor ratings was clear as well: “Stay away from the Lady Gaga class. You have to do the readings and work your butt off...”¹⁷

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