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Becoming-Belieber: Girls' Passionate Encounters with Bieber Culture

Kortney Sherbine

On sidewalks, in the backseats of cars, and behind bedroom doors, on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and many other after-school and unsanctioned spaces of girlhood, young girls across the world are in the throes of a love affair. Some might say that the object of their affection is Justin Bieber, a Canadian pop sensation whose music emerged on the scene in 2009. This affection for Bieber, or “The Biebs” as he is sometimes called, manifests itself in a variety of ways. “I just love pretty much everything about him. He’s cute, he’s awesome, and I just love him so much,” exclaims one girl, approximately eight years old, who waits outside a concert venue in Toronto, clutching a handmade sign that reads, “I [heart] U, Justin: I’ll Be Your ‘Baby’ 4-ever.”¹ At a different concert, thirteen-year-old Ali wears a purple tee shirt covered in intricate puff paint; she spent the week before writing her favorite Bieber song titles in bright neon colors on the front and back. “Being a Belieber is important,” Ali tells me, “because there are people [like Bieber] who when you talk to them or listen to them, they just make you feel happy.”

A constant Twitter stream displays messages of unity and love from fans who call themselves Beliebers. “Why am I Belieber? He never gives up on his fans. He always has faith in us. He believes in us and we believe in him. That’s why,” reads one tweet. “Thumbs up if you have ever cried for Justin or wish he’d just walk into your room and hold you,” reads another. These Beliebers make and use materials and technologies—including signs, posters, clothing, smartphones, and social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram—to create ways in which they may passionately engage with the ideas and objects associated with Bieber culture. In this article, I draw on French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s (1987) notion of *becoming* to consider the ways in which these encounters with people, materials, and technologies are productive, creating space for Beliebers to come into relationship with one another and with popular culture in ways that are new and that I never could have anticipated during my more carefully organized and school-curriculum-driven interactions with girls during my six years as an elementary school teacher. Through my current research into young girls’ after-school fanaticism, I have been able to come to know girls differently than I knew them in schools. I will argue that these after-school girls are engaged in passionate interactions that enable them to experiment with what it might mean to interrelate with other bodies, materials, and ideas to create new and exciting possibilities for themselves.

¹ The displays of fanaticism described in this paper are depicted in the opening scenes of the documentary film, *Justin Bieber: Never Say Never*, which was released by Paramount Studios in 2011 or were observed while I was conducting ethnographic research at Justin Bieber concert venues in the fall of 2012.

The focus of this article is, for the most part, conceptual. Working with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) ideas allows me to rethink the ways in which young girls encounter and come into relationship with popular culture and with the materials related to Bieber culture in particular. As May (2005) suggests, a reconceptualization of these experiences allows us to "carry thought elsewhere," (p. 19), shifting away from hegemonic assumptions about young girls' relationships with popular culture and fanaticism. I also draw from my own research at two concert venues, where I engaged in participant observation and conducted informal interviews in the hours leading up to and during Bieber concerts that were part of his *Believe* world tour. Additionally, I reflect on tweets composed to and about Bieber that I have gathered as a part of a larger research project. This data certainly influences the ways in which I think about young girls' encounters with popular culture. However, my overarching goal is to employ Deleuze and Guattari's concepts to understand the possibilities created by young girls' encounters with Bieber culture in after-school spaces.

Young Girls as Cultural Consumers

As Baker (2004) suggests, "young girls' [cultural] practices are often trivialized in contemporary cultural criticism" (p. 75); fanaticism for, with, and around entertainers like Bieber is frequently mocked by the media and discredited in schools as being distracting or unimportant. The ways in which girls interact with popular music—particularly with the genre of boy bands—is rarely taken seriously and is frequently overlooked altogether, perhaps because so many of those interactions take place in girls' bedrooms as girls listen to music, dance around uninhibitedly, and gaze longingly at posters of their favorite recording artists (McRobbie, 2000). I can personally attest to this, as my own interactions with the popular boy band of the late 1980s, New Kids on the Block (NKOTB), consisted of rolling around in my NKOTB bed sheets and pretending to make out with NKOTB dolls as their music blared from my tape deck and rattled the windows of my bedroom.

This "bedroom culture" of girls' popular music culture may be evolving into something different, however—something more explicitly collaborative, participatory, and interactive (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007; Jenkins, 2006). With the emergence of social networking, twenty-four-hour celebrity news channels and Internet websites, access to popular entertainers has increased significantly in the recent past. Young people who tweet about or to Bieber know that there is a chance he might read the tweet and reply. Fans can comment on personal photographs that Bieber uploads to his Instagram account, and he frequently responds to questions in comment threads on Facebook. Thus, as new ways of accessing, interacting, and coming into relationship continue to emerge through digital technologies, the distance between the fans and those whom they adore seems to decrease (Ito, 2006; Jenkins, 2006).

Despite research that suggests the complexity of interactions between children and popular culture (Buckingham, 1993, 2011; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Dyson, 1997, 2003a, 2003b; Jenkins, 2006; Tobin, 2000), there remains a tendency to consider young girls' fanaticism nothing

more than the consumption and reproduction of mass culture. For example, Orenstein (2011) wrote of her concern about young girls' sexualization and commodification at the hands of popular culture; she argued that children simply cannot resist the ubiquity of stereotype-reinforcing discourses in the media. Orenstein and others (Durham, 2009; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Levin & Kilbourne, 2008) are concerned that the marketing phenomenon of "children getting older younger" or "age compression" (O'Donnell, 2007) robs children of their innocence, forcing them to participate in a culture that too quickly pushes them toward adulthood.

Those who support these reductive notions of children's engagements with popular culture write primarily for parents of young girls and might consider that young girls' participation in Bieber culture positions children as "vulnerable victims" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 18) who have little sense of agency as they engage with the marketing of Bieber, his music, and merchandise such as singing toothbrushes, video games, apparel, dolls, iPod covers, and backpacks. This rhetoric of protection emerges as parents strive to maintain a belief in innocent childhood, separate from a culture perceived to be increasingly amoral (Buckingham, 2011; Sorin, 2005). Jenkins (2006) wrote, "The figure of the child consumer is framed and constructed in specific ways which thereby marginalize or prevent other ways of thinking about the issue" (p. 6). These constructions are often reductive and fail to attend to the complexity of young girls' relationships with Bieber fan culture. In describing how marketers respond to the demands of consumers, O'Donnell (2007) writes that tween girls are "driven by imitation...want more of everything...are environmentally aware...and like attention." O'Donnell's reduction of tween girls into these categories is unsettling. Applying Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of becoming allows a reconsideration of the simplified notion that consumption is all that is occurring when young girls interact with and in Bieber culture in such emotional ways.

The participatory nature of Bieber culture "blurs the distinction between production and consumption" (Ito, 2006, p. 50). The various ways in which young girls engage with Bieber fan culture are often unanticipated, experimental, playful, and ephemeral, making these after-school encounters unpredictable and productive. When we consider what girls create in these encounters with Bieber fan culture and the ways in which girls are becoming during these experiences—rather than thinking only about what Bieber culture does to girls—we see that there is production of new relationships, interactions, affects, emotions, and ideas.

Becoming in Encounters with Bieber Culture

Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of becoming is a concept that allows movement away from a transcendent, linear understanding of being and identity and embraces uncertainty and difference. Becoming also attends to the materiality of young girls' engagements with popular culture as the girl as subject becomes decentered, and everything—including the girl—that makes up those interactions (i.e., Bieber, his music, other fans, posters, apparel, concert venues, YouTube videos, etc.) comes into consideration in what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the assemblage. Simply

put, the assemblage is the coming together of heterogeneous elements such as bodies and materials. To understand young fans' becoming is to acknowledge and appreciate the fervent connections they have with the spaces and materials they encounter. Viewing the processes of young girls' interactions with Bieber fan culture as becoming creates space for resistance to the reductive and oversimplified notions of the child consumer as victim of popular culture. Rather, I can consider what new possibilities emerge for thinking about young girls' fanaticism if I conceptualize the girls and the materials in the assemblage—including (among many others) apparel, posters, smartphones, jewelry, and song lyrics—as becoming entangled in productive ways, interacting with one another and creating new potentials for engaging with and in the world.

Becoming deals with the immanent potential of life—"what a life can do and where a life might go" (Sotirin, 2011, p. 117)—and involves the processes of encounters with another. These are such passionate processes that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) suggest that our becoming is actually becoming that which we encounter—the potential that we have to become something different. For example, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, Ali is simultaneously becoming-puff-paint, becoming-purple-tee-shirt, becoming-concert-venue, becoming-Bieber's-music, and becoming-Belieber. These materials comprise the assemblages of which Ali is also a part, and each assemblage—created anew as new things enter it—makes Ali different than she was before, generating new possibilities, new energy, and new excitement. In these encounters, Ali-becoming-purple-tee-shirt standing outside a concert venue becomes identifiable as a part of a crowd through which energy and excitement flow as bodies come together to sing Bieber's songs, join in choruses of chants, tweet about their experiences, and anticipate what might happen next. In this sense, Ali-becoming-purple-tee-shirt affords a sense of belonging in a group of Beliebers, an opportunity to create and participate in a public display of affection and solidarity. In Ali's becomings, she is something different than a thirteen-year-old girl anticipating a Bieber concert. She is certainly that too, but she is also one who is engaged in relationships within that anticipation—relationships with other people and materials which make and remake who she is as a fan, an adolescent, a girl, and more. Viewing Ali's experiences in terms of becoming allows us to think beyond Ali simply as a consumer of popular culture to Ali as passionately engaged in the constant assembling of fluid relationships that affect and are affected by her desires, emotions, and ways of participating in Bieber fan culture.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) are careful to clarify that becoming "is certainly not imitating, or identifying with something...becoming is a verb with a consistency all its own. It does not reduce to, or lead back to 'appearing,' 'being,' 'equaling'" (p. 239). Accordingly, reducing young girls to mere imitators of popular culture (O'Donnell, 2007) misses the mark.

Becoming is not an isolated, individual state of being, but a constant, indeterminate process that takes place in "continuously changing relationships" (Olsson, 2009, p. 194) between young girls and the materials that surround them. The after-school spaces of Bieber fan culture, such as

concert venues and girls' bedrooms, afford opportunities for young girls to engage with what is valuable to them in order to make something new for themselves. As young girls encounter materials, other people, and the technological tools of social networking, they have opportunities to live differently in the world as they experiment with making, interacting, and accessing.

Understanding girls' relationships with popular culture in this way is no small thing for me as a classroom teacher, and now as a teacher educator. It leads me to refocus my attention both on who and what children are becoming both in and out of sanctioned classroom spaces as they engage with what is valuable to them and also on the ways in which adults might value what is important to children. To appreciate the becomings inherent in young girls' engagements with popular culture requires a shift from assumptions that childhood must look and be a certain thing and away from discourses that reduce children to vulnerable victims and toward an embrace of something much more undetermined and playful. Young girls are not simply used by materials associated with popular culture; rather, they come into relationship with these materials and in those relationships experiment with productive ways in which they might live.

Children encounter things that matter to them and have passionate relationships with people and materials in complex ways that generate energy, emotional attachment, a sense of belonging, and much else. If we embrace children's encounters and becomings with popular culture, sports teams, animals, and music (among many other things) in after-school spaces, we might also begin to value all that the children bring with them to the classroom and all that children contribute to the assemblages of which we are all a part, becoming together.

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