

Youth as Rhizome: Music, Machines, and Multiplicities

Social Alternatives, vol 32, no 2 (2013 – in-press)

Dr Stewart Riddle

Faculty of Education

University of Southern Queensland, Australia

stewart.riddle@usq.edu.au

Abstract

Sociological categories of youth widely used in political rhetoric and educational policy making are limited by the neoliberal discourses and humanist tradition within which they are constructed. Utilising a Deleuzian approach in order to trouble the very concept of youth itself affords opportunities to rethink youth as rhizome; unlinked from the traditional categories of age, class, race and gender. Instead, youth becomes an assemblage of multiplicities combining in radical and different ways to form a becoming-youth that is particular to this time.

Keywords

rhizome, Deleuze, assemblage, multiplicity, youth, musicking

Introduction

Categories of youth used in sociology have traditionally been predicated on the assumption of a stable rational human subject, which is the foundation stone of humanist rationalism. However, it could be argued that we live in post-humanist times (Braidotti 2008), where technology and our historicity require schemes of thought and figurations that might better address the complexities of our age, for both classical humanism and liberal individualism have been disrupted by the postmodern condition. As such, Butler (2004) describes how those terms we use to categorise and recognise ourselves as being human are not only socially articulated, but also that they might become (ex)changeable for other, perhaps hitherto un-thought of terms.

Perhaps at one point it was deemed useful to classify youth by over-coded categories such as age, race, class, gender and sexuality. As an example, the construction of 'generations' as a technique of labelling certain groups of people born within particular time spans became a popular method for describing whole groups of the population in the second half of the twentieth century. Certain social, behavioural, emotional and cognitive attributes were allocated to each subsequent generation in an attempt to distinguish them from previous generations, and in the process the 'generation gap' was constructed as a social truth. However, such categorising often works to reinforce existing deficit views of youth, for example the assumed selfishness of Generation X or the supposed laziness of Generation Y. It seems that such overly simplified categories of youth such as grouping them into generations are no longer relevant – if indeed they ever were – for making sense of youth in the twenty-first century.

Furthermore, there is a need to trouble the very notion of youth itself in order to expose the category as a limiting social construct. For example, one particular version of youth – adolescence – is a relatively recent invention, created by industrialising societies in the eighteenth century. Prior to the factory-production developments of industry, education and the family, there was no distinct stage between childhood and adulthood. The adolescent youth was a creation of the particular historicity of those societies. Coming into the mid-to-late twentieth century, with the rise of mass consumer culture and disposable income of increasing numbers of teenagers who were working in part time employment, a whole new series of categories of youth began to form around subcultures linked to music, fashion, delinquency and deviance from the modes of behaviour previously ascribed to youth. However, such categories do not rest easily in the heterogeneous and noisy milieu of the lifeworlds inhabited by youth in the twenty-first century. A new figuration of youth is needed here, one which provides the capacity for radically reforming youth as a social truth.

Rhizome as a Figuration of Youth

One figuration that might potentially afford a radical rethinking of youth in the social sciences is that of the *rhizome*, proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) in response to the humanist arborescent model of thought that has dominated Western scientific thinking since the Enlightenment. The image of the tree is central to arborescent thought; characterised by totalising dualisms, both hierarchical and unidirectional. Such a model limits the capacity for stepping outside the binaries it creates as the overarching drive is for unity and reaching

towards a particular endpoint, while simultaneously relying on a stable core of truth in the central trunk.

Contrasted against this image of the tree, the rhizome has multiple possible entry points, connecting and rupturing in endlessly changing and dynamic ways. The image of the rhizome is characterised by the principals of multiplicity, connection and heterogeneity. The rhizome offers no stable points of reference, as no particular entry or line is privileged as *the* truth or *the* reality as ‘there are always many possible truths and realities that can all be viewed as social constructs. The existence of multiple entryways automatically implies multiplicity’ (Sermijn et al. 2008: 637). The appeal of the rhizome is in its multiplicities, where there are no points or positions, only lines (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). The tree fixes a point, whereas the rhizome forms assemblages; inventing connections and ruptures that do not fix to any presupposed direction or uniformity.

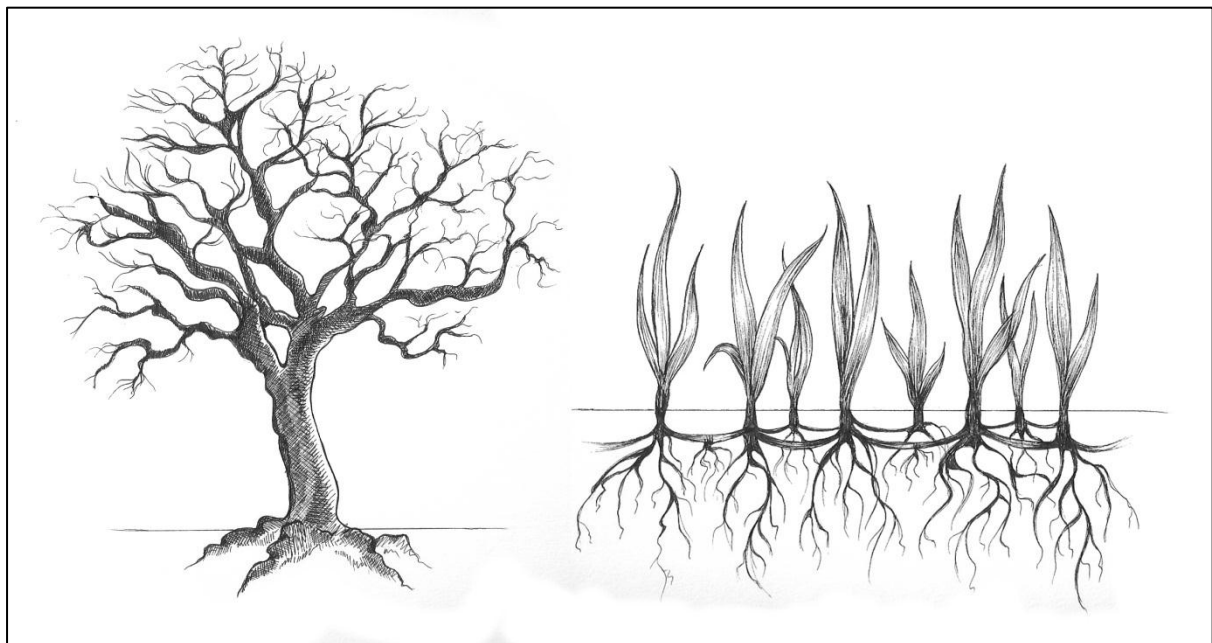


Figure 1: The arborescent tree and rhizomatic grass

In attempting to address how we understand experiences of youth, rhizomatic thinking allows for unbounding the subject from subjectivity, unlinking the self from traditional categories of age, race, class, gender and sexuality. Through this disentanglement of the subject from subjectivity, what we think of as the subject is seen as a series of relationships of affect that always exist in a process of becoming, where stability and rationality is given over to invention, movement and synthesis (Deleuze 1991). It is in both the repetition and difference of movement and affect where meaning can be made. The power of the rhizome is in its refusal to become over-coded, where categories and classifications restrain the boundaries of

the rhizome. Instead, the rhizome is able to form a plane of unbounded multiplicities that are referred to as assemblages.

One assemblage that might provide more useful outcomes for realising contemporary social truths is that of youth as machine. As a becoming-youth, an interconnected series of forces, relations and flows are created, forming particular affects of the self, where the machine of youth privileges certain flows while denying others. In this process, affect leads to effect; youth as cyborg-other, more than human, although the project of becoming is linked to the particular social forces and plays that inhabit the spaces where young people interact with their worlds.

Youth Becoming-Machine, Becoming-Musical, Becoming-Other

One particular aspect of becomings-youth that offers interesting possibilities for imagining youth as other than over-coded categories is that of youth becoming-machine-becoming-musical. Kielian-Gilbert (2010:199) describes the ‘in-between and ever-changing/metamorphic differentiations of music becoming,’ where music offers a milieu for becoming that is expressive, productive and affirmative as flows of difference. There is power in musical affects, particularly given the importance of music in the lives of young people. Young people ‘music’ together, or as Small (1998) coined the term, *musicking*, the performative act of music – whether by playing, listening, thinking, speaking or seeing music – is one machinic assemblage that might provide useful insights into the lived experiences of youth in the twenty-first century.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) speak of the power of music as a creative and active force for deterritorialisation, in order to express what Tamboukou (2009) refers to as the self as threshold, a continual becoming and emergent series of multiplicities, in a perpetual dance of power and desire. Musicking – the productive act of music, whether by performing, listening or through any other musical desire – can deterritorialise striated spaces, folding and smoothing and refolding, which provides its seductive and inimitable power in the lives of young people. Taking such thinking to its boundaries, Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 248) claim that ‘the properly musical content of music is plied by becomings-woman, becomings-child, becomings-animal’. These machinic assemblages form in endless arrays, territorialising and deterritorialising again, ever changing and always becoming-other. In this way, young people musicking allows for their becoming-musical, becoming-other than what would be expressible without music.

Musicking is performative, social, ritual, embodied, spontaneous and transitory, complex and dynamic. Machinic assemblages of musicking take particular lines of flight, where various musicking experiences and events ‘become ever-changing, interconnecting with other groups, and partaking of indeterminate borders, overlapping interests, multiple points of connection with one another, in an always open relation with an “outside” that deterritorialises and de-defines them’ (Kielian-Gilbert 2010: 207). Take, for instance, the image of a teenager sitting on a bus or train, listening to music through headphones and a portable player or mobile phone. There is a physical connection between ears, headphones and the music machine. Lines blur and overlap; where does the human end and the machine begin? There is an actual immersion of ear buds into the outer ear, forming an unbroken relationship between ear-music-electric signal-cable-processor-brain-emotion; a complex assemblage of affect. Music and teenager combine together to form something other. The question thus becomes – what can youth becoming-machine, becoming-musical, becoming-other tell us about the lifeworlds of young people in the twenty-first century that over-coded sociological categories cannot? The musicking teenager becomes much more than an over-coded category; an immanence that transcends arbitrary and arborescent boundaries placed upon them.

Musicking on the edge; becoming-always-other

Szekely (2003: 114) explains that musicking ‘like the “I”, the cogito, the transcendental subject, the abstract individual—is riddled with fear, preoccupied with intention, consumed with context. It must, in turn, either psychologize itself into a motivation toward aesthetic value structures or become dissolved, albeit with discontinuous agitations, into a smooth surface—that is, releasing into, surrendering to, being seduced by the moment of the musical space’. In other words, such musical spaces form the possibility of musical becoming through musicking. This fits with the Deleuzian approach to understanding the project of becoming as formations of planes of immanence, which musicking allows, in order to map hybrid assemblages that weave together to form lifeworlds.

Hybrid assemblages allow for what Reynolds (2009: xiii) refers to as ‘getting it wrong’, where ‘no one can grasp the full content of another’s utterances, register or absorb all of its submerged resonances. So how much more is this so when entire cultures tune in to each other’s transmissions?’ Bringing the noise is part of the complex materiality of bodies where modes of performative expression, including music, allow for transgressive (re)imagining of experience. Or mayhap, as Deleuze and Guattari (1983: 121) ponder, ‘if a

musician tells us that music does not attest to active and conquering forces, but to reactive forces, to reactions to daddy-mommy, we have only to play again on a paradox dear to Nietzsche, while barely modifying it: Freud-as-musician'. Musicking is becoming-other, post-human and otherwise.

One example of musicking as becoming-other is provided by Nancy (2007), focusing on listening as a philosophic act; the resonances of performance as made other through the musicking experience. Nancy poses the very question of what does listening mean and how does the performative act of listening create new assemblages of multiple particularities of the music performance. Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 6) assert that 'language is not life; it gives life orders. Life does not speak; it listens and waits'. Musicking requires the same, as the resonance of music form differences and repetitions akin to the expressive modes of multiplicities. The codes and modes of musical expression create new machines and mutations, diverse and resonant with the discursive materiality of difference. Thus musicking is becoming-other.

Braidotti (2008: 27) claims that we need to 'learn to think differently about ourselves and our systems of values, starting with the accounts of our embodied and embedded subjectivity'. There seems to be a need to challenge the image of lived lives as unified narratives by rational and autonomous subjects. Instead, there are possibilities for breaking up metanarratives to better understand processes of becoming, where subjects are never truly formed in any meaningful or territorialised and striated way. Tamboukou (2009) builds upon this, by describing how moving between deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation provides opportunities to reposition though in new regimes, where the striations of categories are (re)made in ways that are more useful. It is through the deterritorialisation of the subject that subjectivities can be understood as the relational constitutions that they are. In the transforming poststructuralist youthful subject, messiness and vulnerability are understood as processes through which subjectivities are made possible (Davies et al. 2006) both in terms of subjugation and governance, while also becoming liberated from the neoliberal version of humanism that continue to permeate education research, policy making and practice. Youth becoming-machine-musical is but one assemblage that might afford new spaces for imagining youthful subjects.

Youth in the twenty-first century are nomadic subjects; cartographic figurations, where the subject is co-produced in spatial and temporal interactions and exchanges (Braidotti 2008). The affective interactions of flows and forces works to form machinic assemblages, whether through music, the body, or anything other. Thus, the body becomes an

assemblage that interacts with other bodies, assemblages and affects (Kofoed & Ringrose 2012), where (dis)connections and relationships between bodies form particular assemblages. As a result, the subject becomes radically immanent and intensive; ‘an assemblage of forces, or flows, intensities and passions that solidify – in space – and consolidate – in time – within the singular configuration commonly known as the “individual” self’ (Braidotti 2008: 35). Through the processes of becoming-musical-machinic-other, youth can be imagined in ways that move beyond the limiting boundaries of thought, opening up space to think youth anew. Given the tensions and urgencies of our particular historicity, it is about time that we look for ways to better understand the complex lifeworlds of youth if we are to more carefully provide them with opportunities through the social strata of our educational and other institutions where we work.

Reference List

- Braidotti, R. 2008 'Of Poststructuralist Ethics and Nomadic Subjects', in M. Düwell, C. Rehmann-Sutter & D. Mieth (eds) *The Contingent Nature of Life: Bioethics and the Limits of Human Existence*, Springer, Dordrecht: 25-36.
- Butler, J. 2004 *Undoing Gender*, Routledge, New York.
- Davies, B. Browne, J. Gannon, S. Hopkins, L. McCann, H. & Wihlborg, M. 2006 'Constituting the Feminist Subject in Poststructuralist Discourse', *Feminism & Psychology*, 16, 1: 87-103.
- Deleuze, G. 1991 *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. 1987 *A thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Kielian-Gilbert, M. 2010 'Music and the Difference in Becoming', in B. Hulse & N. Nesbitt (eds) *Sounding the Virtual: Gilles Deleuze and the Theory and Philosophy of Music*, Ashgate Publishing Limited, Surrey: 199-225.
- Kofoed, J. & Ringrose, J. 2012 'Travelling and Sticky Affects: Exploring Teens and Sexualized Cyberbullying Through a Butlerian-Deleuzian-Guattarian Lens', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 33, 1: 5-20.
- Nancy, J. 2007 *Listening*, Fordham University Press, New York.

- Reynolds, S. 2009 *Bring the Noise: 20 Years of Writing About Hip Rock and Hip Hop*, Soft Skull Press, Berkley.
- Sermijn, J. Devlieger, P. & Loots, G. 2008 'The Narrative Construction of the Self: Selfhood as a Rhizomatic Story', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14, 4: 632-650.
- Small, C. 1998 *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, University Press of New England, Hanover.
- Szekely, M. 2003 'Becoming-Still: Perspectives on Musical Ontology After Deleuze and Guattari', *Social Semiotics*, 13, 2: 113-128.
- Tamboukou, M. 2009 'Machinic Assemblages: Women, Art Education and Space', in J. Dillabough, J. McLeod & M. Mills (eds) *Troubling Gender in Education*, Routledge, Abingdon: 57-73.