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Deleuze and the girl
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In this article, I seek to represent something that must be lived. It feels impossible to represent that which is described by Deleuze and Guattari as movement that is simultaneous, asymmetrical, instantaneous, unfinalized, zig-zag. This movement is Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of difference, that which they name becoming. To put this concept of becoming to work, I use three texts. One is chapter 10 of *A Thousand Plateaus*, the second is Brian Massumi’s book *A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, and the last is a short excerpt from my fieldnotes taken during my ethnographic research on the subject formation of adolescent girls. Specifically, the girl is Jesse, a senior cheerleader whose daily school life involved seeking and expressing her difference, or her becoming. She struggled against the over-coded, essentialized category of cheerleader and the discursive and material expectations of that category at her high school. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of becoming allows me to explore Jesse’s unique difference, to privilege her specificity. So rather than looking on the surface to ‘see’ the uniforms and uniformity of Jesse (or try to ascertain how she is ‘like’ a cheerleader, or ‘fits into’ the category), my task here is to work with the girl as an event, to represent how Jesse unfolds herself through micro-particular movements with her others. Her specificities were single, concrete instances of how she dressed, how she behaved during practice, how she moved her body, how she expressed her desires. These ‘singular and concrete forms’ make up the activity of her becoming.

**Keywords:** Deleuze; feminism; girls’ studies

**Introduction**

Several years ago, I spent a year in a small-town high school in the rural, southern USA as a feminist ethnographer, studying the subject formation of senior adolescent girls. My fieldwork consisted of my arriving at Garner High School at 7:30 in the morning, parking my 1986 BMW in the senior parking lot, entering the school with a throng of students, and searching the halls for the senior girl whom I was shadowing that particular day. Each day, as a participant observer, I followed the same schedule as the girl: classes, breaks, lunch, and extra-curricular activities. I carried with me a field notebook in which I wrote copious descriptive, analytic, and reflective notes on the details of her school day, seeking ‘the surfaces of events, small details, minor shifts, and subtle contours of practices’ (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, 106). In class, I sat in a student desk either beside or behind the girl I was following, and my day ended with the last school-related activity, sometimes at 10:00 pm. My choice to conduct fieldwork in this manner – spending time with individual senior girls going about...
their normal school day – was so that I could ‘read’ the girls’ cultural practices within relations of power by participating in their school worlds.

Jesse was one of the senior girls who participated in the research, and I have become preoccupied with her again as I have been re-reading Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus* – in particular, ‘Chapter 10: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible’. A vertiginous (and at times bewildering) portion of the book, chapter 10 describes their ontology of *becoming*. I have been intrigued by the concept of *becoming*, and have read around it over the years, so I sought to take up Mazzei and McCoy’s challenge for authors of this special issue to ‘think with Deleuze’. In order to do this, I wished to read and think with Deleuze without a path or plan or logic, to enter a rhizome and be surprised by what emerged. Rather than begin with data to analyze using Deleuze, I remained open to allow new connections to irrupt. You could say that I read in the threshold. As I read, in the threshold between Deleuze and my experiences as an ethnographer, the becoming-data that surfaced was Jesse.

Jesse had been a cheerleader since she was in fourth grade, when she first donned the uniform to cheer for a youth recreational football team. She continued to cheer through middle and high school. Jesse’s daily school life involved seeking and expressing her difference, or *becoming*. She struggled against the over-coded, essentialized category of cheerleader and the discursive and material expectations of that category at Garner High School. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of difference, one of *becoming*, allows me to explore Jesse’s unique difference, to privilege her specificity, which in Deleuzian thought, is multiplicitous. Deleuze is not alone in his emphasis on specificities. As Foucault (2000) explained:

> It’s true that the problems I pose are always concerned with particular and limited questions … If we want to pose problems in a rigorous, exact way that’s likely to allow serious investigations, shouldn’t we look for these problems precisely in their most singular and concrete forms? … Further, if we truly want to construct something new or, in any case, if we want the great systems to be opened up, finally, to the challenge of a certain number of real problems, we have to go and look for the data and questions where these are located. (285)

So rather than looking on the surface to ‘see’ the uniforms and uniformity of Jesse (or try to ascertain how she is ‘like’ a cheerleader, or ‘fits into’ the category), the challenge is to work with *the girl as an event*, to notice how Jesse unfolds herself through micro-particular movements with her others. Her specificities were single, concrete instances of how she dressed, how she behaved during practice, how she moved her body, how she expressed her desires. These ‘singular and concrete forms’ make up the activity of *becoming*, and *the girl as event* ‘is the immanent consequence of becoming’ (Badiou 2007, 40).

**Becoming and difference**

Becoming and difference are key themes of Deleuze’s work, and they serve as his response to western philosophy’s preoccupation with becoming as a transcendent, linear process and difference being diluted to difference-from-the-same, which relies on a stable identity (or sameness) for external comparisons and relations, as in grouping. That is, traditional philosophy emphasizes universal characteristics to group; for example, the social category of *woman* possesses consistent traits and remains stable
because of its distinction from man. Another relevant example would be the social categories of working-class or whiteness as possessing coherent essences that might be easily and readily recognizable and predictable.

However, with Deleuze, difference is liberated from its subordination to sameness, and becoming is not a transcendent, linear process between two points. There is no origin, no destination, no end point, or goal. In other words, while becoming is directional (away from sameness), the movement creates something unique and particular within that would render the entire category imperceptible. Becoming, then, is immanent to (not outside of) the social field to which it applies. Though becoming can be described as an escape, it always ‘takes place in the World As We Know It ... Bodies in flight do not leave the world behind ... they take the world with them – into the future’ (Massumi 1992, 105).

To illustrate, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) offer this:

A line of becoming is not defined by points it connects ... on the contrary, it passes between points, it comes up through the middle ... The line of becoming that unites the wasp and the orchid produces a shared deterritorialization: of the wasp, in that it becomes a liberated piece of the orchid’s reproductive system, but also of the orchid, in that it becomes the object of an orgasm in the wasp, also liberated from its own reproduction. (293, emphasis in original)

The becoming is in the relationship between the wasp and the orchid. The becoming is the something else, the newness that is created. Becoming is the movement through a unique event that produces experimentation and change. Becoming is a state of being in-between, the ‘continual production of difference immanent within events’ (Stagoll 2005, 21).

How do we go from the natural world of the wasp and orchid to the social world of the girl and cheerleading? Just as the wasp and orchid are transformed into something else through their becoming – just as they break from their essential categories – Deleuze and Guattari (1987) want social identities to be liberated from ‘the great dualism machines’ such as man/woman, rational/irrational, masculine/feminine, mind/body, adult/child, and so on (276). So the task here is to think with Deleuze to show the possibilities of both the girl and cheerleading transforming into something else as an effect of their becoming. The girl and cheerleading meet, collide, and contaminate one another in the threshold. The effect of the ‘crossing and impregnating’ is becoming (276).

Deleuze and Guattari use the hyphenated concept of becoming-woman to exemplify their thought, yet becoming-woman does not ‘mean’ becoming a woman as in the ‘unfolding of an essence in a teleologically ordained process leading to a synthesizing identity’ (Braidotti 1994, 111). Becoming-woman is a constant, fluid process of changes, interactions, and transformations that work to destabilize molar forms and relations. Molar – and its companion concept, molecular – is important to a Deleuzian becoming. Molar is something that is well-defined, massive, and governing – such as large structures or identity categories. For example, cheerleading can be considered a molar form in the southern USA; cheerleading exists within discursive and material fields saturated with patriarchy, masculinity, and historically laden ideals of dainty, feminine southern girlhood. Specifically, cheerleading in Garner was/is a sidelined extra-curricular activity that services others (i.e., sports players). The gaze from spectators was/is directed toward seductive and coy routines that sexualize and feminize girls’ bodies: provocative pelvic thrusts, flirtatious eye-winking, seductive nodding.
Deleuze and Guattari (1987) wrote that a molar entity is defined by forms and ‘endowed with functions assigned to a subject’ (275). However, they go on to assert:

> Becoming-woman is not imitating this entity or even transforming oneself into it … [becoming-woman] first must be understood as a function of something else. (275, emphasis added)

That something else is what produces the molecular; the molecular involves micro-entities, processes, creations – tiny things (singularities) that destabilize the perception of a whole. Becoming is ‘directional (away from molarity), but not directed (no one body or will can pilot it)’; it is not intentional (Massumi 1992, 103). Becoming happens in the middle of molar structures that break apart dichotomies that organize bodies, experiences, institutions, and histories (Sotirin 2005); the molecular is the effect of this breaking apart. The molecular is a deterritorialization of the molar, obviously, but more-so the molecular relates to singularities, to individual responses, to becoming. And molecular becomings are the very substance of events.

The girl: the event

As I explained in the introduction, Jesse emerged in my re-reading of A Thousand Plateaus. Actually, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refer to the girl to make their points regarding becoming-woman. They write:

> [The girl] is a line of flight. Thus girls do not belong to an age group, sex, order, or kingdom: they slip in everywhere, between orders, ages, sexes; they produce molecular sexes on the line of flight in relation to the dualism machines they cross right through. The only way to get outside the dualisms is to be-between, to pass between them. (276–7)

The girl draws her strength ‘from the becoming’, from the passing through, from the micro, from movement. Girls who break apart man/woman and adult/child binaries are not regressions or abnormalities or pathologies. The girl is ‘an experiment, constantly traversing borderlines of childhood and adulthood, innocence and disenchantment, naivete and wisdom. She is not becoming a woman; she is always a becoming-woman’ (Sotirin 2005, 107). There is a promise in the girl as an event that intersects with the world.

So here we have Jesse who occupied a molar territory of cheerleading: a molar territory with a dominant form that attempted to stabilize her identity. Yet the molecular processes of her becoming deterritorialized this space. Perhaps we should think of the wasp and orchid again, and remember that becoming happened in the event of connection, in a threshold. We can think of the girl as an event that connects micro-events in a threshold in order to unleash desire, to evoke experimentation. We can think of the girl as a surface on which to break from tradition. As Sotirin (2005) puts it, becomings: ‘do not stop to participate in the organized forms we can recognize as men and women, children and adults … [it] explodes the ideas about what we are and what we can be beyond the categories that seem to contain us’ (99).

Experiments, movements, expressions, connections, and new possibilities, these descriptors of the event convey action and productivity. In The Logic of Sense, Deleuze (1990) turns the event from a noun to an infinitive that captures transformation; we now use ‘to make a girl’ which is a product – or an actualization – of a particular confluence of forces (Stagoll 2005). Girl-as-event is no longer a quest for
meaning (what it ‘is’) but a pure effect of the production and interaction among immanent dynamics. Badiou (2007) puts it simply: ‘Becoming becomes the event itself’ (38). The event is the expression of becoming.

My goal in the next section is to attempt to map Jesse as an event, her immanent becoming in the threshold of cheerleading. I focus on a couple of specificities to play with a limit that is never reached. I highlight the becoming-processes of Jesse’s intensities with others and the breaking apart, and breaking open, of her subjectivity. These intensities depended on a relationship, a connection, a reaching, or branching out – much like that of the wasp and orchid – to transform. Jesse was becoming in that she was a site of struggle over embodiment, materiality, and the transgression of what a cheerleader does – not who she is. I map how Jesse destabilized the perception of a whole: the perception of a cheerleader who is contained and bound by sexist definitions of femininity. Becoming is never finalized and completed, yet the connections and micro-events create tiny explosions that keep new creations on the move.

Becoming implies ‘two simultaneous movements, one by which a term (the subject) is withdrawn from the majority, and another by which a term (the agent) rises up from the minority’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 291). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe this as asymmetrical, instantaneous, zig-zag movements. Using linear writing to represent the zig-zag and the un-finalized processes of becoming seems impossible. Next, I take up what feels impossible and endeavor to represent what must be lived, anyway.

**Representing becoming**

Massumi (1992) warns me that becoming ‘cannot be adequately described. If it could, it would already be what it is becoming, in which case it wouldn’t be becoming at all’ (103). What Massumi explains here is that the event of becoming cannot be predicted or prescribed in advance; that is, no one can write out rules for what becoming should be in a particular social field (e.g., specific rules for social revolutions). But what can be enumerated are ways in which becoming might be mapped using strategies and resistances that constitute ‘friction in the molar machine’ (1992, 106). I use some of Massumi’s (1992) strategies in mapping Jesse’s becoming: cherishing derelict spaces, wearing camouflage, sidling, and straddling – then coming out (102–6). Rather than defining them upfront (i.e., here), I utilize them throughout Jesse-as-event to experiment with how they might elaborate her becoming. Yet I also avoid the molar form of citational power that is demanded of APA style; I integrate Massumi’s language as a source without the disruption of copious quotation marks and page numbers embedded in the text. I create/experiment with a molecular strategy of citing differently by using endnotes with page numbers only that are less obtrusive and that will ideally create a different experience for the reader.

As well, I seek to use another molecular form of writing: the second person. This usage allows Jesse to be closer to the reader and move away from the molar objectivity/distance of third-person convention. This intimacy is not to shift nearer to a truth but to fold the event of Jesse’s becoming into a synthesis of past, past-present, and future. ‘The event is neither past nor future’, Badiou writes. ‘The event makes us present to the present’ (2007, 39). That is, the event of representation is also a becoming in that it can possibly create a new existence for the reader. To create this new existence, this becoming-I for the reader, I refrain from any first person narrative ‘I’ in the representation. I do this not to remain hidden but to disrupt the traditional ethnographic, even confessional ‘I’ that haunts interpretive and critical qualitative research.
traditions. I refuse the narrative ‘I’ – or the molar ‘I’ – that is expected to give a full representation for the listener to easily consume and comprehend; the narrative or molar ‘I’ tricks readers into thinking that they have the full picture. Yet a becoming-I in a narration does not rely on or even demand a speaking subject who reveals The Truth. A becoming-I in narration plays with a limit that is never reached and forces the reader into new ways of seeing/hearing/listening/imagining. The new ways of reading can be explored with the following questions:

- Are readers caught in the molar machine of representation and do they want/need/desire to ‘hear’ Jesse’s voice, her words?
- Might readers live molecularly with the text and not depend on the writer (me) to tell them what to think?
- Might readers use their imaginations to exit the mapping with the opening of a problematic rather than a closing of a solution – or what Derrida terms a strategic indeterminacy?
- And finally, how might readers experience a becoming as they engage with the representation? In other words, might Jesse’s becoming grasp readers so that they themselves are becoming-Jesse?

So my task here, then, is to think with Deleuze and represent Jesse’s aliveness and her power to live in the ways that her becoming incites her to live. It is at once an experiment and an event; an experiment in Massumi’s (1987) terms: ‘The question is not: is it true? But: does it work?’ (xv). That is, I do not seek the meaning of Jesse’s becoming, but analyze the connectives to see what opens up and what closes down inside the material and discursive molar machine of cheerleading in the southern USA. My goal with the mapping is to think with Deleuze as both provocation and explanation. The mapping is not merely a representation but something to be interpreted yet again; mapping does not close down social reality but attempts to create lines of flight in thinking and becoming. Massumi (1992) explains that becoming:

is the madness of the imagination. It is eminently ethical, in Spinoza’s sense of tending toward an augmentation of the power to live in the world … To qualify for it [becoming], all one must do is to be alive. To succeed at it, one need only live more fully. (108)

An unfolding

Yours is the most recognizable car in the senior parking lot. The phrase NO DOUBT is printed in all caps at the top of the front windshield of your black Chevy Cavalier, displaying your fascination with Gwen Stefani, the lead singer of the band No Doubt – a rock star who appeals to your punk sensibilities. You step out of your car and begin to walk slowly up the gentle hill toward the school, comfortable in your own skin. Rather than a backpack, you carry a black Adidas gym bag slung on your shoulder. You are petite and stocky like a gymnast, and the gym bag bounces around well below your hips, almost to your knees. You wear black baggy sweatpants, a black tank top, and flip-flops. You ought to be wearing your cheerleading uniform today; there is a pep rally this afternoon and a basketball game tonight. The expectation is that, on game days, you overcode your body with molar constraints: you parade around school in your short skirt for the whole day, remove your nose ring, tame your wildly layered hair, and decorate the teams’ lockers with ribbons and candy, but you do not do that.
Just as molarity is a mode of desire, your leaving molarity behind is a desire. You direct your molecular freedom toward working that tension between molar/bodily limitations of cheerleading and supermolecularity, you counteractualize.

You edge around the front of the school and reach the basketball gymnasium; you have a brief cheerleading practice this morning. You grasp the door handle, roll your eyes, and yank open the door. You know what is about to happen.

You enter The Empire of Like, occupied by molarized bodies and a bundle of complex forces of rules, laws, traditions that form those bodies into docile substances. There stand decades-old cheerleaders, decked out bow-to-tie in red-and-black school spirit: tight ponytails bound by curly ribbons, halter-tops, 10-inch pleated skirts, skin tanned from UV sun beds. They are heiresses of habitual patterns and normalities of femininity and sexuality. They dress to entertain; they move to seduce. Molarity is a desire; fitting-in is a desire. They wear the uniform with pleasure, hyperaware of its sexiness and power. They enter into the social contract of molar coexistence, they actualize.

You drop your bag on the bleachers. The molar coach points to your nose, signaling you to remove your nose ring. You do so effortlessly, as you have many times before. You move toward the accumulated Molars who stand waiting for you but not looking at you: putting final touches on one another’s hair, texting on phones, adjusting skirt waistbands. This morning you continue to crack the habit, to bifurcate. It began yesterday afternoon. The stimulus is a cheer; the responses are multiple.

You and the others automatically assemble into a staggered, double line-up on the gym floor. You are in the front row, center, still dressed in your un-uniform. The chanting begins with simultaneous clapping, sharp movements of arms and legs, bright smiles, synchronized. Coexisting bodies; shared environment. The routine follows a molarized trajectory; a cheer that you inherited, a cheer that has habituated, a cheer that you hate.

The unhinging begins. The final move arrives. The girls who frame you spin around in their places, lift up the back of their skirts and expose the mascot paws emblazoned there. Three girls in the back row rotate their hips twice – as would a stripper on a pole. A few other girls shake their hips a little instead. You stand there facing forward, untrained. You move from this general to your singular in your becoming.

There is a friction in the molar machine, unresolved. The school bell rings, indicating the start of the school day as molars scatter, doors slam, feet stomp, girls cry. The future is contaminated, in ruins.

Your first class of the day is weight training. You are one of three girls in the elective class, surrounded by football and baseball players, Who Have A Right To Be Here. You still wear your un-uniform. You tie a bandana around your hair, do-rag style, and knuckle-bump two football players who are your best friends. All three of you live on the west side of Garner, two streets away from crack town, and all of your parents work at the window-making factory. The other two girls in the class spin on the stationery bikes for an hour. You lift with the boys. You inhabit the molar masculine field house with your expanded body, your body that is hyperdifferentiated. You cherish this derelict space, this zone of indeterminacy.

You use the same equipment as the boys; sometimes you press as much weight as they do. You spot their heavy lifting; they trust you. You crack open the existing order of the molar masculine field house to make it your own, forcing it to expand to fit you. Your becoming is in-between. You are in-between molar femininity and molar masculinity, inhabiting
neither fully – sidling, straddling, sidestepping. You transform both, in the threshold. You are supermolecularity.

In the locker room, you change into your uniform, a muscled, differentiated body invading a short skirt and halter-top. Blowing apart masculinity and femininity. You apply a bit of mascara, a touch of lipstick, but you are unable to attach a hairbow to your Posh-Spice style inverted bob. You are camouflaged, a passing-person capable of simulating the molar grid. You must pass through the inside; your escape is a zig-zag within.

The pep rally begins with you and the molars in the common space of the staggered line-up. The social field is alive with energy, expectation. The spectators consume and produce with their Molar Gaze; molarity is an apparatus of capture, seeking sameness, recognizability, equilibrium – or, exhibition, scantily clad bodies, flirtatious gestures.

The Molar Cheer starts up; the Molar Gaze anticipates fulfillment. It knows what to expect – sexual enticement. Seeing sex, imagining sex. The Molar Gaze is trained to give the same-right response, over and over again; the response has accumulated and is habituated. See, the Molar Gaze is not a static but a productive process: a making-the-same. The Molar Gaze yells for sex.

The final move arrives. The abyss opens wide, ready to enfold potentiality. The girls who frame you spin around in their places, lift up the back of their skirts and expose the mascot paws emblazoned there. Three girls in the back row rotate their hips twice – as would a stripper on a pole. A few other girls shake their hips a little instead.

You perform a standing backflip.

The Molar Gaze goes off in multiple directions, not knowing where to look or how to synthesize the irresolvable contradiction. Your becoming is a visible incoherence, an undoing, a fracture. You transform; the cheer transforms; the gaze transforms. For a moment everyone and everything become something else. Fleeting success.

It will not be the last time. You will do it again, again, again. To achieve the goal that has no end means ceasing to be what you are in order to become what you cannot be: supermolecular forever. The goal is a limit approached, never reached; what is important is the process.

Notes
1. All people and place names are pseudonyms.
2. Observation in fieldwork has been described in qualitative texts as taking place in the natural field setting and as producing a first-hand account of the object of knowledge (e.g., see Robert and Biklen 1998). More specifically, participant observation: ‘provides the opportunity for acquiring the status of “trusted person”. Through being a part of the social setting, you learn firsthand how the actions of research participants correspond to their words [or not, I would add]; see patterns of behavior; experience the unexpected, as well as the expected; and develop a quality of trust with your others that motivates them to tell you what otherwise they might not’ (Glesne 1999, 43).
3. Wolcott (1995) makes an important distinction between fieldwork and ‘(just) being in the field’. Fieldwork is different from ‘just being there’ in its intent; ‘fieldwork is a form of inquiry in which one is immersed personally in the ongoing social activities of some individual or group for the purposes of research. Fieldwork is characterized by personal involvement to achieve some level of understanding that will be shared by others’ (65).
4. I am indebted to Hillevi Lenz Taguchi for making this point during a presentation at the 2010 annual conference of the American Educational Research Association in Denver, Colorado.
5. Lisa Mazzei and I have written elsewhere about the assumptions of a centered, privileged ‘I’, one that is overburdened with narrating unproblematized truths from a coherent, grounding presence (Jackson and Mazzei 2008).

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