



## **Cameras and Constructs and Cancels, Oh My! Thinking Through Youth and Celebrity**

— Maria Alberto

Duvall, Spring-Serenity, editor. *Celebrity and Youth: Mediated Audiences, Fame Aspirations, and Identity Formation*. Lang, 2019. 236 pp. \$54.95 pb. ISBN 9781433143090. Mediated Youth Series.

Lyga, Barry, and Morgan Baden. *The Hive*. Kids Can, 2019. 416 pp. \$18.99 hc. ISBN 9781525300608.

Reid, Raziel. *Kens*. Penguin, 2018. 256 pp. \$17.99 hc. ISBN 9780735263772.

Gershowitz, Jordan. *Ignore the Trolls*. Illustrated by Sandhya Prabhat, Pow! Kids Books, 2019. 32 pp. \$17.99 hc. ISBN 9781576879337.

With the collection *Celebrity and Youth: Mediated Audiences, Fame Aspirations, and Identity Formation*, editor Spring-Serenity Duvall and her contributors set out to interrogate the many complex, multi-faceted connections between youth and celebrity. As Duvall promises readers in her introduction, *Celebrity and Youth* offers a rich, interdisciplinary dive into the many strands connecting these two concepts, including social media, political meaning-making, explorations of sexuality and ageing, parasocial relationships, fandom, and identity work, among others.

This collection is a timely addition to the growing body of interdisciplinary work on celebrity culture, particularly with its focus on how social constructions and conceptions of “youth” help to produce and impact wider perceptions of what “celebrity” is in the first place. Because each term tends to be used broadly and uncritically, Duvall begins by acknowledging that both youth and celebrity are complex, socially constructed phenomena. She then considers how more nuanced definitions demonstrate the problems with such common conceptions as “Celebrity culture is youth-obsessed and young people are obsessed with celebrities” (1). Duvall points out that this kind of simple causation statement actually abridges or outright overlooks particular dynamics of power, consumer preferences, and other

simultaneous factors (1). Throughout this collection, Duvall and her contributors address such oversights through a range of interdisciplinary analyses that explore how young people—from preteens to teens and even young adults—interact with the concept of celebrity as identity work, a pathway to economic success, or an avenue into learning about global issues, among other reasons. Contributors' analyses build from a diverse range of case studies conducted across the UK, the EU, the US, and Canada, and privilege young people's own interactions with celebrity. The result is an interesting and compelling interdisciplinary work replete with insights that should prove valuable to readers across a range of disciplines themselves.

YA-savvy readers in particular might see interesting reflections of concepts from this collection in recent fiction aimed at readers of the same demographics. Barry Lyga and Morgan Baden's *The Hive*, for instance, grapples with hyperscrutiny, technological manipulation, and the issues that can come of having users—particularly teenagers—“live” parts of their lives on social media for public consumption. *The Hive* follows Cassie, the teenage daughter of a recently deceased hacker, as she finds herself a social pariah on the run after making a morbid joke about the sitting president on social media. Her post costs Cassie because, in *The Hive*, Americans' social media usage is aggregated on a platform called BLINQ, where user reactions are collated into trends called “Levels” and mobs are encouraged to sanction users whose posts generate high Levels of collective condemnation. With this as its backdrop, *The Hive* brings together an uncanny technological uneasiness reminiscent of *Black Mirror* with a gamified struggle for survival that should look familiar to anyone who has read *The Hunger Games*. The result is the creation of a dystopian near future in which the conferral of microcelebrity can become a real punishment for unlucky teenagers. Lyga and Baden's version of microcelebrity becomes especially sinister in the ways in which it contorts the three elements that Ana Jorge and Thays Nunes see as defining teenage microcelebrity: courting audience attention (*Celebrity and Youth* 40-41), then “successfully managing these connections” (41), and finally, using social media platforms in self-aware ways (41). In *The Hive*, though, each of these three features of teenage microcelebrity has been warped by BLINQ. Cassie does not court the scope of audience attention she actually receives, cannot possibly “manage” the narrative that her single post is spun into, and later discovers that the BLINQ

platform itself is being used in ways that its everyday users cannot access: that it is, in fact, a test run for new means of letting the current president—whose televised speeches are unmistakably Trump-esque—remain in power for a second term through manufactured popularity. In this way, *The Hive* plays on familiar ideas of microcelebrity, spinning them out to extreme conclusions.

The characters of Raziel Reid's slick, unrelentingly performative parody *Kens*, on the other hand, evince a different kind of relationship between youth and celebrity. Where Cassie of *The Hive* shuns her unwanted microcelebrity status, various characters throughout *Kens* both crave and deride the microcelebrity status available to more popular high-school peers. In particular, Reid digs into the toxic methods by which celebrity can be created, particularly distortions of Annebeth Bels and Hilde Van den Bulck's observation that celebrity results "from negotiations between the person looking for fame, the media, and audiences" (*Celebrity and Youth* 18). The most evident example in *Kens* comes through the three "queens" who rule this fictional high school: all of them are teenage boys who constantly perform hyper-campy, high-femme gayness. For Reid's *Kens*, performativity and microcelebrity are inextricably intertwined: the novel frequently suggests that two of the three "queens" are straight boys pressured into visibly queer performances as a means of becoming popular. Moreover, from its third act on, the three *Kens*' microcelebrity spreads beyond their small town and into high schools across the United States in a morbid wave of copycat suicides: after the first boy is killed and posed as a suicide, he gains immense posthumous popularity, so the second boy films his own suicide and grows even more posthumously popular, and the third becomes notorious for curating these images. To round out this satire on celebrity, Reid also throws in body modification, demonic bargains, and a dystopian setting that can get lost in the relentless barrage of contemporary queer slang and the novel's own metatextual narration.

Finally, the lushly illustrated *Ignore the Trolls*, from author Jordan Gershowitz and illustrator Sandhya Prabhat, is predicated on the assumption that even younger audiences can benefit from early cautions about the exposure, bullying, and self-devaluation that often stem from social media. This picture book, which follows protagonist Tim the Timid through his trials toward becoming a Knight, offers elementary-school-aged readers an allegorical account of trolling, as Tim is bullied by little green trolls who watch and mock his early practice attempts

using scrolls, bluebirds, and “picture-takers.” Though the overall theme is laudable, the message itself seems to boil down to equating bravery with popularity, and vice versa, as well as implying that one can “solve” trolling by simply ignoring those who engage in it. Moreover, the Knights are popular microcelebrities, and once Tim joins their ranks by doing all the right things against the trolls, his every setback seems to be resolved.

The first five chapters of *Celebrity and Youth* look at a broad range of examples of how young people engage with celebrity in non-fictional contexts, some as celebrities themselves and others as consumers of celebrity through various media texts and social contexts. First, Annebeth Bels and Hilde Van den Bulck work with preteens at a Flemish after-school program to discern how celebrities become a resource for identity work among children exploring adult issues and transitioning more fully into social groups beyond their families. Bels and Van den Bulck find that their interviewees are interested in topics they cannot always explore at home, such as music, material goods, and sexuality. Celebrity provides them avenues through which to locate and explain these interests. Next, Ana Jorge and Thays Nunes explore how Portuguese vloggers were recruited as “digital ambassadors” for a new telecommunications service, leveraging their followers to help recruit new consumers from young audiences. They find that microcelebrity becomes a particularly complicated balancing act because these celebrities are so much closer to the ground: even more than traditional celebrity, microcelebrity demands that vloggers juggle between their own artistic and cultural identities, on the one hand, and the demands of audiences, including fans and sponsors, on the other.

Jessica Birthisel then explores how the entertainment value of YouTube prank videos is coloured by gendered roles and messages that demonstrate some of the same themes as sexism and domestic violence. Birthisel notes that couples’ prank videos follow a certain formula, draw certain comments, and produce certain kinds of troubling admiration that reinforce “disturbing gender stereotypes and ideologies about women and men’s bodies, sexuality, and acceptable behavior in relationships” (*Celebrity and Youth* 77). Next, Pilar Lacasa, Julián de la Fuente, Sara Cortés, and María Ruth García-Pernía examine how adolescents perform cultural activism through multimodal fan works that remix celebrity texts, such as celebrity appearances by the boy bands One Direction and Magcon. Lacasa, de la

Fuente, Cortés, and García-Pernía offer several pertinent insights about how fans, unlike other consumers, engage with celebrity in particular ways: for fans, “Celebrities’ activities become texts that fans actively rebuild” with multimodal artifacts such as photographic edits (*Celebrity and Youth* 86). For teenage fans in particular, seeking out celebrity activities to rebuild in this way helps them develop skills for navigating social networks and other digital environments. Lacasa, de la Fuente, Cortés, and García-Pernía maintain that fans’ engagement with celebrity can become an inroad to increased media literacy and social activism. Leigh M. Moscovitz and Andrew C. Billings then explore further this thread of social activism from the celebrity side, examining the challenges facing openly gay male athletes in US sports, as these men balance the media-driven pressures of coming out with the desire to live their authentic selves and set positive examples for other closeted LGBTQ+ youth. Moscovitz and Billings offer a fundamental insight into the collection’s premise, noting that youth and celebrity have a “cyclical relationship” (*Celebrity and Youth* 118): gay male athletes in particular “recognized their stories were part of a tale larger than any of them, interwoven and interconnected with the narratives of those who had come before them and those still yet to tell their stories” (119). Not only are youth and celebrity complex, intertwined phenomena, but they also, to a certain extent, actually help produce one another.

The latter chapters of *Celebrity and Youth* focus more specifically on connections among celebrity, girls, and young women. Spring-Serenity Duvall’s chapter on actress Emma Watson explores how Watson’s work post-Harry Potter franchise encourages feminist responses from fans who might not have known much about world issues before Watson championed them. This chapter offers an especially fascinating and timely read, given Watson’s and her co-stars’ stands against transphobic statements from Harry Potter author J. K. Rowling in the summer of 2020. Next, Jessica E. Johnston explores issues of cultural appropriation, neo-liberal feminism, and identity in Kendall Jenner’s and Gigi Hadid’s fashion choices, examining how these two models’ celebrity status makes their choices hyper-visible at the same time that Jenner and Hadid attempt to explain away less savoury choices. For Jenner and Hadid, Johnston writes, markers of cultural difference can be taken up and thrown off as the two models like, and thus become an additional example of “postfeminist politics of empowerment and personal

choice" (*Celebrity and Youth* 153). For BIPOC individuals, however, these same hairstyles and clothing choices are subject to more scrutiny and policing. Due to their celebrity, Johnston notes, Jenner's and Hadid's fashion choices become hyper-visible and even trendy in ways that can occlude the necessary conversations about whether a white model and a white-passing one have the right to represent others' cultures in this way. Representing another perspective on representation, Newly Paul explores the media coverage and burgeoning celebrity of Malia and Sasha Obama. Paul observes that media coverage of the Obama sisters, which was carefully curated by the White House, created a new narrative of control and polish that may set precedents for future young Black celebrities. And finally, Maghan Molloy Jackson explores narratives found in Taylor Swift's music and celebrity, both of which Jackson finds draw from, while also reconstructing, certain happiness scripts that purport to depict how young women can find happiness, fulfillment, and success in life. This chapter also coincides with recent examples, as Swift's July 2020 release of her studio album *Folklore* re-provokes some of the questions Jackson raises here.

While the nine chapters of *Celebrity and Youth* present a broad range of topics, they also converge in the ways that each privileges the voices and lived experiences of young people interacting with celebrity, whether this celebrity is their own fame, the focus of their fandom practices, or the subject of their consumption (1). These chapters build a persuasive picture of celebrity as a powerful and often desirable force that consumers engage in various ways. Though this insight may seem self-evident, it is actually quite critical since through different forms of engagement, the young people spotlighted throughout this collection also demonstrate that they—and by extension, most consumers of celebrity—have varying degrees of awareness about how their engagement drives celebrity itself. Fans, such as those interviewed by Lacasa, de la Fuente, Cortés, and García-Pernía, often have higher degrees of such critical self-awareness, as they scrutinize and "actively rebuild" (86) the parts of celebrity fan-objects that most interest them. Meanwhile, the more casual fans of Emma Watson from Duvall's chapter, or the newspaper readers seeing stories about the Obama sisters in Paul's, may not actively engage with the notion of celebrity at all beyond surface-level stories encountered every day.

Relatedly, one area where this collection could have done further work is with race, which intersects and interacts with youth and celebrity in particular ways. While Newly Paul offers an excellent chapter on the Obama sisters, and although *Celebrity and Youth* tries to focus on diversity, this goal does not result in in-depth conversations about race and thus risks overlooking or dismissing important questions. In the United States alone, the myriad stories of Black children subjected to violence and denied the innocence attributed to white children demonstrate that children of colour are often not seen or judged as youth by white structures of power. Celebrity, too, becomes fraught and complicated in different ways: calls that #representationmatters in popular culture and media are just a starting point, as the conversations and actions needed extend far beyond offering audiences more BIPOC voices and characters. Kristen J. Warner, for instance, points to the dangers of “plastic representation,” in which negative stereotypes are not interrogated or dismantled but simply replaced by neutral or arguably more positive ones, which results in “a combination of synthetic elements put together and shaped to look like meaningful imagery but which can only approximate depth and substance.” The risks of such plastic representation certainly dovetail with celebrity. Questions that could use more interrogation include how young BIPOC celebrities are usually portrayed, why or how young BIPOC audiences are envisioned and thus marketed toward, and what identity work might look like among BIPOC youth. Other critical intersections among race, youth, and celebrity might include Black performers’ immortalization in reaction GIFs used by white teens, a form of “digital blackface” (Jackson). One might also consider the ways in which BIPOC youth are often struck with negative, microcelebrity-level status—micro-notoriety?—that their white peers are not.

While collections such as *Celebrity and Youth* cannot address every angle of such broad topics, there is also a growing need for attention to more historically understudied viewpoints, and there are distinct ways in which celebrity impacts BIPOC youth while celebrity options for BIPOC youth are also delimited. Both Lyga and Baden’s *The Hive* and Reid’s *Kens* offer head-on engagement with some of these issues: *The Hive*’s protagonist Cassie astutely wonders if her biracial identity makes people’s criminalization of her worse (Lyga and Baden 195); meanwhile, characters throughout Reid’s cutting parody vilify mosques and SJWs in the same breath (Reid 169), identify their town as “least diverse,” as if diversity were simply metrical (170), and, in

a horrifying sequence that goes beyond parody in 2020, get their sole Black classmate racially profiled and shot by police (179). Thus, while Paul's observations that the Obama sisters' images were tightly curated because they were both the President's daughters and among the US's first Black girl celebrities do offer a starting point, explorations of the intersections among race, celebrity, and youth already extend much further in fiction and therefore require further exploration in academic work as well.

Overall, *Youth and Celebrity* makes several timely and important contributions to a growing conversation. Duvall and her contributors offer a range of work demonstrating that celebrity is complex, pervasive, and influential, and that young people navigate and engage with celebrity in various ways as they explore and grow into their own identities.

## Works Cited

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