Children’s Music, MP3 Players, and Expressive Practices at a Vermont Elementary School: Media Consumption as Social Organization among Schoolchildren

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Abstract

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Over the last generation changes in the social structure of the family and children’s command of an increasing share of family spending have led marketers to cultivate children as an important consumer demographic. The designation “tween,” which one marketer refers to as kids “too old for Elmo but too young for Eminem,” has become a catchall category that includes kids as young as four and as old as fifteen. Music marketed to children—led by the Disney juggernaut, which promotes superstar acts such as the Jonas Brothers and Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus across television, radio, film, DVDs and CDs, and branded toys, clothing, and electronics—represents a rare “healthy” area of the music industry, whose growth has paralleled the expansion of portable media technologies throughout U.S. consumer culture. The increasing availability of portable media devices, along with the widespread installation of Internet terminals in schools and educators’ turn toward corporate-produced “edutainment” for lessons, has reconfigured schools as central sites of children’s media consumption. Off-brand MP3 players packaged with cheap and brightly colored earbuds have become more and more affordable, and marketers increasingly target kids with celebrity-branded music devices and innovations like Hasbro’s iDog series of toy portable speakers, which fit naturally among children’s colorful and interactive collections of toys. At
the forefront of the “digital revolution, children are now active—even iconic—users of digital music technologies. This dissertation argues that tweens, as prominent consumers of ascendant music genres and media devices, represent a burgeoning counterpublic, whose expressions of solidarity and group affiliation are increasingly deferred to by mainstream artists and the entertainment industry. We appear to be witnessing the culmination of a process set in motion almost seventy years ago, when during the postwar period marketers experimented with promoting products directly to children, beginning to articulate children as a demographic identity group who might eventually claim independence and public autonomy for themselves.

Through long-term ethnographic research at one small community of children at an elementary school in southern Vermont, this dissertation examines how these transformations in the commercial children’s music and entertainment industry are revolutionizing they way children, their peers, and adults relate to one another in school. Headphones mediate face-to-face peer relationships, as children share their earbuds with friends and listen to music together while still participating in the dense overlap of talk, touch, and gesture in groups of peers. Kids treat MP3 players less like “technology” and more like “toys,” domesticating them within traditional childhood material cultures already characterized by playful physical interaction and portable objects such as toys, trading cards, and dolls that can be shared, manipulated, and held close. And kids use digital music devices to expand their repertoires of communicative practices—like passing notes or whispering—that allow them to create and maintain connections with intimate friends beyond the reach of adults. Kids position the connections and interactions afforded by digital music listening as a direct challenge to the
overarching goals around language and literacy that structure their experience of classroom education. Innovations in digital media and the new children’s music industry furnish channels and repertoires through which kids express solidarity with other kids, with potentially transformative implications for the role and status of children’s in their schools and communities.
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Introduction

This dissertation is about the encounter between entertainment and education as resources and repertoires for individual action that structure the complex social dynamics of school. The expressive ecology of school, through which roles of child and adult, teacher and student, friend and peer, older and younger, are constituted, is built out of a productive tension between entertainment and education, consumption and learning. Popular music, literacy, and entertainment media are key repertoires structuring interaction and expression in school, and this project examines in fine-grained ethnographic detail how these repertoires are performed in the everyday life of kids at a small elementary school called Heartsboro Central School, the center of the life of the small rural community of Heartsboro, a town of about 800 in southern Vermont.

The core of this study is a close examination of the role of portable digital music devices—iPods and MP3 players—in kids' social lives at school. I argue that music listening practices, commonly viewed as simply receptive, can and should be understood as distinctly expressive, and in fact as a prominent element of a wider ecology of expressive practices that include talk, verbal poetics, literacy, gesture, and touch, among other modalities. Music listening is expressive in school primarily as a subtle repertoire for articulating interpersonal relationships and accumulating social capital, more than as the expression of taste and cultural capital, a standard view.

By attending to the small-scale interactions in which kids put emerging technologies and mass-mediated music to use in everyday school environments, I seek a broader argument
about the interconnections of education and media in the everyday life of children. Media, especially popular entertainment media, is often neglected in both scholarly and popular discourses about schooling; and similarly, children’s media consumption is commonly understood without reference to the schools in which kids spend large portions of their lives. But in children’s lives such a separation is much less clear. Certainly adults resist the intrusion of media into pedagogical spaces, and the texts of popular music for children can often seem entirely unrelated, or even opposed, to school-based educational goals. But it is important to note how practices or texts from education and entertainment make reference to one another precisely through exclusion and opposition. In children’s everyday school lives, education and entertainment become powerful resources through which powerful institutions—governmentally chartered schools, transnational media corporations, and the modern “institution” of childhood itself—are positioned in relation to one another as part of a larger system of meaning and social organization. My central claim in this dissertation is that an analytical separation between schooling and consumerism is fundamentally unsustainable, but not because, as some have argued, schooling simply reproduces consumerism (Schor 2004): rather, childhood is the mediating term than brings these fields into relation, because children are the subjects and objects of both schooling and consumer media. Despite distinct histories and institutional structures, schooling, media, and childhood are mutually constituted fields of meaning and power, and children’s lives today cannot be understood outside of a framework that includes at least these three terms.

This institutional perspective is revealing, not simply on theoretical grounds, but also for what it tells us about historical and cultural developments in childhood in the contemporary
U.S. Childhood seems increasingly (or at least with increasing visibility) to be articulated in terms of *solidarity* among children—a solidarity that is made possible because of the positioning of children as unequal participants in the powerful institutions of school and media. Children’s media consumption practices in school provide unique insights into this dynamic through which children’s “peer culture” is articulated as expressions of solidarity with implications for the wider politics of education and consumerism.

**Heartsboro**

Heartsboro is a town of fewer than 800 people in southern Vermont. Children in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade (ages 3–14) attend HCS. While I was in residence there during the 2007–8 school year as a full-time researcher, HCS had fewer than seventy K–8 students, so classes were paired—first with second grade, third with fourth, fifth with sixth, seventh with eighth—and still the largest class had only seventeen students. Heartsboro does not have a high school, so older kids are bussed to high schools in neighboring towns. HCS is the center of Heartsboro’s social life: it is the largest institution and employer in the town, its building contains the town office and administration, and the gym/auditorium is where social events, fundraisers, select board meetings, and annual “town hall meetings” (the classic New England political institution) are held. Heartsboro has a small downtown that is built somewhat densely, and about half of the population lives in town, and the other half in houses on the surrounding hills and mountains. The kids who live in town spend time out of school playing together, but kids from up in the hills can be isolated by the long drive to get anywhere. Like many communities, the school creates opportunities for social interaction and
participation that would not exist otherwise—for kids and adults, who, coming to pick up or drop off their children, may find opportunities to interact with other adults that would not otherwise arise. HCS, therefore, was an optimal site for ethnographic observation: a population small enough to allow familiarity with each individual, but large enough that students of a range of age are represented, forming multiple relationships, networks, and affiliations around age, gender, family, and other factors.

With a small student body, and a wide range of ages, the social life of HCS may be more inclusive than at larger schools. Friendships between 5th and 8th graders are common, for instance, if only because the pool of possible friends one’s own age can be very small. Older girls often help caring for younger children, sometimes holding kindergarteners on their laps during school-wide assemblies, or taking responsibility for supervising children with special needs during the lunch period. To adults at HCS, this mixing of ages is not always positive, as they sometimes blame social difficulties among elementary age students on their imitation of older kids’ behaviors.

By 2007 only a few teachers at HCS were from Heartsboro. Several commuted as much as an hour from Bennington or across the borders in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. In fact, this represented a drastic and abrupt shift. A cohort of teachers and administrators from Heartsboro and neighboring towns who had worked at HCS continuously for the previous thirty years had either retired or the year before or would retire after the 2007–8 school year. It is clear that the last few years mark a major historical transition for the school and its relation to the community, though how that will play out remains to be seen. New teachers and administrators are definitely less patient with the “way things have always been,” which
can creates some tensions with students (who are remarkably conservative about school traditions) and the community. At the same time new staff can be forces for positive change, as, for instance, a few recent hires, noting the lack of a regular guidance counselor, became advocates for including such a position (with mixed success).

**Methods**

In 2007 I returned to Heartsboro after several years’ absence to do the research for this dissertation. I was first introduced to Heartsboro in 2002, when I worked as the music teacher at HCS and subsequently maintained contact with a few Heartsboro residents, and I count many of the students and teachers at HCS as friends. As a long-term resident with family ties to the region in which this study is located, I claim a strong personal understanding of how specificities of region, place, and community color my interlocutors’ consumption of nationally distributed entertainment media. As a music teacher participating in staff meetings and designing a standards-based music curriculum, I gained insight into the practical considerations of lesson planning, classroom management, and the personal and institutional strategies through which teachers and administrators address student behavior and media use. As a friend, playmate, and confidant of these children, I have a unique view of the pleasures and frustrations of students’ intimate sociability and their relationships with adults.

Working with children always presents special ethical concerns. It can be bureaucratically, practically, and ethically fraught (Christensen and James 2000), but basic principles—of consent, reciprocity, and minimization of risk—apply. Columbia University carefully monitors human subjects research through its institutional review board, and my
work is held to strict standards of confidentiality and ethical practices of data collection. In order to protect children from any unintended consequences of participation, I keep all fieldnotes and recordings in a secure location and change all names and identifying features (so all the names, including that of the locality and school, are pseudonyms). All my research was conducted under the institutional banners of both Columbia University and Heartsboro Central School. I take affiliation with the latter to underscore my obligation to contribute productively to Heartsboro students and the community by addressing educational goals as part of the research strategy and by producing a final document that is hopefully of interest to the community.

This project was tailored to account for the particular challenges and promises of doing ethnography in schools (Gilmore and Glatthorn 1982), mindful that that schools structure interaction, authority, and social identity in unique ways (Becker 1972; Mehan 1979; Pelissier 1991). During the period of fieldwork I spent my days following kids around school, hanging out, talking, and playing during free time, and sitting with kids or at the back of the classroom during classes. I would ask students after (or while) observing an interesting practice to explain things I might have missed or misunderstood, but I made it clear that they should feel no obligation to reveal anything they wished not to. I repeatedly emphasized that anything the kids did or said would remain strictly anonymous, and in particular that I would never use my authority as an adult to discipline them or get them in “trouble” with teachers or parents. A few months into the school year I agreed to serve as the one-day-a-week music teacher. This institutional role helped legitimate and solidify my continuous presence at HCS for both kids and adults. I was now “the music teacher,” which made a lot more sense to
everyone than “researcher,” even if only a fraction of my time was spent teaching music classes. I stated explicitly to the administration and students that I would prioritize my non-authoritative relationships with kids over behavior management or discipline, preserving an ethnographic commitment to confidentiality and reciprocity at the frequent expense of maintaining an orderly or effective classroom. That such neutrality was necessary, and that power relations were understood as confrontational, at least by kids, was apparent in the reference one seventh-grade boy made to me as a “civilian” (i.e., non-combatant) while explaining to another student that I would not “put his name in the book,” or officially record and punish some act of troublemaking.

Data collection consisted of observation of children’s vocal-expressive practices and interactions in class and out, and participation in free-time talk, playground games, and daily classroom activities. In addition to recording detailed fieldnotes, I made audio and video recordings of children’s sociable talk and performances. I conducted recurring semi-structured interviews with every 3rd–8th grade student about media use, school values, and social life, and I recorded informal question-and-answer interactions with younger students. I led regular open-ended discussion groups in which children would talk about music and video brought in by them or accessed on the Internet. As the one-day-a-week music teacher, I participated in regular staff meetings and collaborated with teachers and administration to design curricula, address social and behavior problems, and develop extracurricular performance opportunities. My music class had students conduct research about popular musicians, the music industry, and media channels for advertising and distributing music. These projects elicited substantial discourse about popular media, documented through
audio-visual recordings. In anticipation of the potential difficulties of eliciting children’s viewpoints, I combined interviews, discussion groups, and classroom projects with these multiple strategies for observing and recording children’s naturally occurring talk, expression, and interaction to provide ethnographic grounding for rigorous analysis.

I analyzed these data by cataloguing the scripts, routines, and tropes of children’s expressive repertoires, and I indexed themes by age, gender, social group, location, and interactional contexts, especially noting instances where media use, instruction, and vocal-expressive practices coincide or overlap. I connected these with teacher comments about educational goals and student behavior, and student expressions of aesthetic, educational, and social values. With techniques for analyzing talk, music, and expression from ethnomusicology and linguistic anthropology, this detailed micro-analytic study is designed to yield a rigorous qualitative account of the interrelations between children’s vocalization, media and technology practices, and school contexts.

I walked a fine line as an adult and an ethnographer. To make sure I stayed within the bounds of “appropriate” adult interactions with the kids, I strictly avoided ever participating in discussions about sex or drugs or other illicit topics, though they certainly came up regularly in kids’ conversations. But I also had an obligation to my research and to the kids not to actively suppress these very common discourses the way a teacher might. Such topics would often slip away as quickly as they arose, but if kids were engaged in extended conversation that I did not think I should participate in, I would regularly exit quietly or join an adjacent conversation.
Rural New England, rusticity, and provincialism

Many families go back locally several generations in Heartsboro, and cousins and siblings from a few large extended families account for a substantial portion of the student body at HCS. Historically Heartsboro’s economy was dominated by small manufacturing and some tourism, but by 2007 little local industry remained, and a chair factory and ski-slope had both closed in the last generation. Thus Heartsboro has been a microcosm of a dramatic regional process of deindustrialization in the northeastern U.S. (cf. Kirsch 1998). Many of the parents of HCS’s students, therefore, find themselves commuting long distances to work each morning. The nearest grocery store is a thirty-minute drive away, and in the winter the roads through the mountains can be treacherous. Though there is a strong sense of community in Heartsboro—town hall meetings are well attended, for instance, and half a dozen Italian surnames are shared among several multi-generation Heartsboro families—travel is nonetheless a fundamental part of the lives of Heartsboro's inhabitants.

Rural New England has long been subject to contestations of place and class in the competing economic pulls of tourism, industry, and agriculture (D. Brown 1995; Conforti 2001; Gittell and Colgan 2004; B. Harrison N.d.). Heartsboro exists on the rural periphery of three small cities (Bennington and Brattleboro, Vermont, and North Adams, Massachusetts), each of which has been powerfully affected in the last generation by the nation-wide de-industrialization of the U.S. (Kirsch 1998; Kotval and Mullin 1997). Heartsboro’s historically rural identity is decentered by its current dependence on surrounding urban centers for jobs and for daily amenities like grocery stores, medical services, and entertainment. Community members joke that the town is “forty minutes from everywhere” via often-treacherous
mountain roads. Regional development lately emphasizes “high-art” cultural tourism, and the area now hosts several museums, performing arts venues, and theater festivals (e.g., Graham 2005). The service and hospitality industries that revolve around these institutions are the main employers of Heartsboro’s eight hundred residents.¹ In the last decade several individuals with administrative positions in arts institutions have moved their families to Heartsboro and enrolled their children in the village’s well-regarded primary school. Heartsboro’s median income has risen as a result.² Increasingly, political and economic positions are framed as aesthetic or “cultural” orientations, so “taste” is discursively focused in the region’s power relations (Bourdieu 1984; Hennion 2004).

Heartsboro was framed by its own residents as provincial, or at least isolated. While I was proposing this project, many adults expressed surprise that I would consider Heartsboro a relevant site to study children’s media practices. As one teacher put it, HCS kids “can’t be very representative of American children,” and they “don’t know a lot about the rest of the world.” Certain teachers also made dismissive comments about Heartsboro residents as “rednecks” or “goombas.” Kids, too, participated in this discourse of provincialism. One complained that she wished she lived someplace “with a mall,” and “where you can walk to see your friends” (which, at least for those who live in the surrounding hills rather than the small downtown, was not possible). One student with strong connections to friends in neighboring communities sneered that “these kids never know anything outside of

¹ Here I am using data from the “Heartsboro” Town Plan of 2005, but I refrain from including the full reference in the interest of maintaining confidentiality.

² This data is from a county commission’s profile of Heartsboro. Again I withhold the citation in the interest of confidentiality.
Heartsboro.” Kids commonly labeled recent transplants “flatlanders” and those from neighboring Massachusetts “Mass-holes.”

This self-portrayal of Heartsboro as outside-the-mainstream, peripheral, or rustically “other” (Cloke and Little 1997), and its representation as small, out-of-the-way, and rural, colors the participation of Heartsboro children in U.S. public culture as consumers and audiences. Mass media in diverse contexts are used by producers and consumers to articulate trans-local—national, regional, and global—social identities (Abu-Lughod 2001; Mankekar 1999; Postill 2006), and mass-media identifications have been shown to be important markers of “fitting in as a New American” for many children of immigrants to the U.S. (Minks 1999:86). For many Heartsboro children, rurality is a marker of a particular status in the U.S., and constructing musical identifications drawn from the mass media can allow rural children to claim a cosmopolitan identity in a deterritorialized world (Appadurai 1996).

Some notes on terms and categories

“Childish”

Throughout this dissertation I use the term “childish” advisedly. I am sensitive to Adora Svitak’s argument that “the traits the word ‘childish’ addresses are seen so often in adults that we should abolish this age-discriminatory word when it comes to criticizing behavior associated with irresponsibility and irrational thinking” (2010). But to describe without criticism things identified by children and adults as marked for childhood, I find the adjective “childish” preferable to the genitive “children’s,” which is by now so common. To my ear, “children’s” carries a suggestion of independently claimed ownership, and this celebratory
valence potentially obscures how children negotiate the boundaries of their lives with adults and others. On the other hand, it would be impossible to scrub the term “childish” of senses of triviality, irrationality, or irresponsibility, and I am not sure a more neutral term would be preferable. I think the value judgments implicit in “childish” might be useful, insofar as they highlight the fact that children and childhood remain marginalized and disputed categories, which helps to avoid whitewashing the actual discourses and genealogies that come with notions of childhood or childishness.

“Kids”

Further, I would argue that the negative meanings of “childish” are implicit in the noun “child” itself. Children of all ages certainly bristle under the suggestions of immaturity and innocence that the word “child” carries. Most children are much more likely to identify as “kids,” and the word seems to be preferred by adults as well to describe their offspring or students. “Child” seems to be loaded with so much ideological friction that it gets caught in speakers’ mouths. The turn toward “kid” by kids and adults suggests a logic of labeling and identity that strikes me as characteristic, or at least suggestive, of “identity politics” debates over terms like “lady” or “black,” an argument I will pursue in some detail in chapter 2. Further, the boundaries of “child” are controversial at best (are 13-year-olds “children”?), whereas the boundaries of “kid” are ever expanding (like “tween,” which I discuss in chapter 2). It is common enough for college teachers to refer to their students as “kids” (though this is also often frowned upon, and points toward the eventual boundaries of the term “kid”), as the age at which Americans are willing to acknowledge someone as “grown up” moves later
and later (Swyers 2009). So for the most part I use “kid” to denote the kids in this study, and
I use “child” as a formal theoretical term with particular histories and currency in academic
usage. It is the term “childish” that presents the real difficulty, because my use of this term is
intended to denote a “native” taxonomy of objects, repertoires, and practices, and few
children would willingly describe their world as “childish.” Ideally an adjective of “kid”
would be available, but I hesitate to coin “kid-ish” as awkward and potentially meaningless,
and “kid-like” (like “childlike”) would mean something different entirely. The genitive here
might work, as in the title of Gary Cross’s book about toys, *Kids’ Stuff* (1997), and would
more closely approximate the usage of my interlocutors. But like “children’s,” “kids’”
suggests a level of ownership that may not be valid, or at minimum it implies an indexical
connection to actual kids, whereas I am interested in exploring how actual kids’ usage and
practices might result in a more coherent and possibly self-standing taxonomy that does not
necessarily require the physical presence of actually existing young people to activate its
meaning.

*Age*

“Kids” is a catchall term for a wide range of children and youth, but it is also the term
used commonly by children, adolescents, teachers, and parents. This dissertation is
concerned to explore how affiliations to categories like “childhood,” “kid,” or “childish” take
place in actual people’s lives, but that means that I do not place strict boundaries on my
definitions of kid or child. Much of the ethnographic material in the later chapters comes
from 11–13-year-olds, though several important examples also include younger children. The
media examples discussed in chapter two are marketed to and consumed by children in many cases as young as four, and as old as fifteen, and the celebrity performers in many cases are even older than that. Similarly the kids in my ethnographic study range widely, from preschool to middle school, in some cases that means toddlers to teenagers. (I spent time with and collected data about the youngest kids at HCS, but almost all those discussed in this dissertation are in first grade or above.) I justify this wide range in part out of convenience, but also because I think it corresponds to an actually occurring social formation that is observable everyday at school and in the media. Throughout this dissertation I am interested in finding something like “solidarity” among individuals who are affiliating as part of a group defined by their status as children, kids, or youth. In many cases, of course, this group is further subdivided by age, gender, ethnicity, and social status, so kids articulating solidarity with one another against particular adult authority will not necessarily identify with kids significantly younger than them. But that it why it is important to take a wide view, to see how peer solidarity practices play out similarly among peer groups of different ages, or how media portrayals of public “tween” solidarity interpellate kids of widely varying ages as members of this oppositional category. The point is that age is the terrain upon which distinction is occurring, where a broad category of “child” or “kid” is clearly constructed as part of a binary of opposition to something like “adults,” so it matters less that there are subdivisions within either side of that binary. In any event, to be precise, the participants at the heart of this study track closely with the marketing category “tween” —8–12-year-olds, though some younger and some older kids are included prominently as well. It is not clear at all to me that it is useful to bound the category “child” through reference to an arbitrary
numerical scale of age, any more than it would be appropriate to conduct a study of racial identity by categorizing individuals according to measures of their skin tone.

_Adults_

I do not spend very much time discussing adults at HCS in this dissertation. On the one hand this is a major lack, in that my topic, broadly, is children’s peer cultural solidarity, which I frequently frame as “oppositional”—to adults, of course. And adults at HCS had many opinions about the practices I discuss, which, because of their authority, certainly had bearing on those practices. In staff meetings and conversations, for instance, teachers associated MP3 players with behavioral problems, and the year following my residence all portable electronic devices (MP3 players, video game devices, cell phones) were banned from use in school. But this fact should not imply an overdetermined model of school as structured simply by (adult) power and (childhood) resistance. For a cultural-studies-primed audience (in which I include myself), the banning of MP3 players is an expected punchline or “aha” moment that crystallizes the complicated social practices I’m trying to explore into a simple and inescapable model of power, and, worse, can easily slip into demonizing adults whom I respect and care for. These caveats aside, I consider the banning of MP3 players in some more detail in the conclusion. As an instance of adults reacting _en bloc_ to students’ practices, the banning suggests a solidarity in action among adults that is complementary to the childhood solidarity I trace throughout this dissertation. Further, that it is adults reacting to children’s practices, and not always vice versa, suggests clearly that children’s cultural
practices are frequently autonomous and independent—not simply responses to a dominant adult culture.

I think that the difficulty I have in adequately representing adults is revealing of the power dynamics that structure schools. The truth is that most adults do not flatter themselves when they talk to and about children, and even the most fair-minded and well-intentioned of teachers tend to come across poorly—condescending, overbearing, and arbitrary enforcers of authority—even in the most even-handed accounts. (Reviewing recordings of my interactions with kids at HCS, I constantly cringe at myself for these same reasons.) My view is that this reflects structural factors in the relative positioning of adults and children in schools (structural factors the analysis of which is a major occupation of this dissertation), and individual teachers are certainly not to “blame” for the historical and bureaucratic constitution of their workplaces. That is, teachers are by definition and professional obligation in positions of power, and good intentions or even conscientious practice cannot flatten or legitimate such ultimately arbitrary (if justifiable) authority. The nature of narrative is to personalize actions, so my presentation of ethnographic stories in which adults do not come off well will necessarily carry critical implications about the specific adult in the story, which I think would be a fundamentally incorrect analysis. Further, from the viewpoint of children, the authoritative element of adults’ role in schools is even more pronounced, so by focusing specifically on practices through which kids perform a solidarity that excludes (and implicates) adults, my project could not help but foreground the worst possible interpretation of teachers’ actions. Therefore, I think it is unfair, at best, to set these particular adults up for
criticism, when they are not doing anything unusual, and when those actions they do take that might come in for criticism are banal and commonplace, and not individual failings at all.³

My attempt to resolve this difficulty is simply to ignore adults as much as possible, and to focus narrowly on the children involved. My mental image is of the adults in these pages to appear somewhat like the voiceless and faceless adults in the cartoon television show The Muppet Babies, or perhaps the film adaptations of the Peanuts comics—present only when ethnographically relevant, and intentionally voiceless. I think this actually reflects the way children experience their peer sociality fairly well, so that envoicing adults would not only be unnecessary, but even perhaps counterproductive.

Musical taste

The period of my fieldwork at HCS coincided with remarkable expansion in the children’s music industry. In 2006, the soundtrack to the Disney Channel musical movie High School Musical was an explosive success, and became the top-selling album, in all categories, for the entire year. One week early in 2006, the top three spots on the Billboard charts were occupied by children’s records. Paving the way for the success of High School Musical, the independent label Razor & Tie had several years of remarkable success marketing collections of Top 40 pop songs re-recorded for “tweens” (kids 4–12 years old, according to their marketing literature), under the brand Kidz Bop, including multiple Top-10

³ I am aware that an extreme version of this position might imply that good teaching is irrelevant or impossible, which is not my view. I deeply respect and wish to encourage the work of good teachers as well as those who think about how the institutions of teaching and schooling might be structured to be even more ethical and successful (however “success” is measured). The discussion here is intended more to address the technical problem of ethnographically representing teachers adequately without magnifying often trivially problematic actions. My solution to this problem is for the most part to side step it.
records. In 2006 and 2007, Disney expanded on the success of *High School Musical* by introducing Hannah Montana (Miley Cyrus) and then the Jonas Brothers. Since 2006, recordings with children as their primary audience consistently rank at the top of the sales charts, in direct competition with mainstream, adult pop artists. (See chapter 2 for an in-depth discussion of these developments.)

At HCS, kids’ musical tastes ranged widely, from such “tween” music acts, which were very popular, to Top 40 pop, rock, hip hop, and R&B, to more obscure recordings of “hard-core” metal or hip hop passed down from older siblings or friends, and even to popular music from the 1970s and 1980s, which many were introduced to by their parents. Music was central to children’s peer culture at HCS, a constant topic of conversation and debate, and children listened to music whenever they could get away with it, using the MP3 players that more and more of them carried with them (and which school authorities increasingly viewed with suspicion) or sneaking views of music videos on websites they found to bypass the Internet content filters on the school’s recently installed computers. Though recreational activities such as hunting, snowmobiling, and riding ATVs were common, and NASCAR auto racing was a favorite sport, I wish to avoid too strongly suggesting that regional characteristics or markers of “rusticity” necessarily determined kids’ music or media habits. Rather, media and consumer practices can be powerfully deterritorializing forces, and even in a relatively isolated location like Heartsboro, children can be remarkably cosmopolitan in their consumption. For instance, country music did not have a privileged place among Heartsboro adults’ or kids’ tastes, despite the prevalence of such common markers of white working-class U.S. culture as hunting or NASCAR.
**MP3 players at HCS**

MP3 players were by far the most widely used media devices at school. Many HCS students also owned portable gaming devices—Nintendo’s DS was the most common—and most were interested in and desired cell phones, but two factors limited the presence of phones at school: (1) as elementary- and middle-school students, this population was relatively young to have their own mobile phones, whose monthly costs represented a much larger investment than the one-time purchase of an MP3 player or gaming device, and (2) Heartsboro is geographically isolated and had no cell phone towers at the time, so even the few students who did have phones used them primarily for their built-in cameras, since they did not get any signal and they did not subscribe to music services (like Verizon’s V Cast). One girl received a satellite radio receiver at Christmas that doubled as an MP3 player; it seemed to work only intermittently. I anticipate that MP3 players are likewise prominent in other populations of schoolkids of similar ages, but Heartsboro’s rural isolation may have tipped the balance somewhat against wireless communication devices.4

Christmas of 2007 was a watershed for personal music player ownership at Heartsboro. Throughout the fall semester, kids without MP3 players had talked constantly about desiring one and fawned over their friends’ devices. By Christmas the products had become so available and affordable that in January a majority of kids in third grade and up returned to school with one. This mirrors a process nationally: in 2004, 12 percent of 8–10 year olds and 20 percent of 11–14 year olds owned MP3 players (Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout 2005:13), while by 2010 the figures for those groups were 61 percent and 80 percent, respectively.

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4 By 2011 mobile phones were much more common among HCS students, though the town itself still did have cell service.
(Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts 2010:10). The parallel with the expansion of children’s music sales during these years should be clear: the middle of the decade represented a distinct turning point for children’s media and entertainment overall. Research that suggests that media consumption varies by age and gender conform broadly with my observations at HCS, as well (Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts 2010:37), though to a large extent the meaning of these practices seems to overlap for kids of different ages and genders, which I discuss in chapters 3–5.

MP3 players clearly participated in hierarchies of brand value. For instance, kids rarely referred to their non-iPod devices by brand name. Instead the labels that circulated were “iPod” and “MP3” (often without the modifying “player”). They distinguished categorically between “iPods” and “MP3s,” explicitly and vehemently rejecting any suggestion I might make that iPods were a subset of the category “MP3 player.” Owners of iPods would commonly answer “no” to the question, “do you own an MP3 player?”

These hierarchies and negotiations of brand value were apparent in a playful competition one morning in June, between eighth-grader Daisy and fifth-grader Cally. Cally bragged, “I got this necklace for twenty-five dollars at the flea market!”

Daisy replied as though Cally’s comment were a challenge: “Oh yeah, well I got this necklace for free from my aunt!”

Cally took up the game: “Well I have a locket.”

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5 Technically, “MP3” is a “format” for encoding and compressing music as a digital file (Sterne 2006), so an “MP3 player” is a playback device for music encoded with the MP3 format, and the term “MP3” more commonly refers to an individual song file, whatever format it is encoded in.

6 This categorical slippage was present among adults, too, some of whom understood iPod and MP3 as competing brands from Apple and Microsoft.
Daisy lifted her ankle over the table, “I have these flip flops.”

“I have Adidas flip flops.”

“Well mine have polka dots—you can’t beat that.”

Cally came back with a trump card: “I have this MP3 player.”

Daisy smiled. “Well you gotta play fair.” But then her smiled widened and she reached over and grabbed the iPod Shuffle Melissa had clipped to her sweatshirt. “I have an iPod!”—expressing the clear hierarchy of iPods over any old MP3 player.

“But that’s Melissa’s.”

Daisy turned to Melissa, “Give me your iPod for the day. Say it.” Melissa mumbled her consent.

“Okay, see, it’s mine!” And with that clear statement of possession, Daisy won; Cally could not beat an iPod, and had no response.

But status competition was far from the only way that ownership and use of digital music devices participated in social relationships at HCS. Perhaps the most common way kids at HCS listened to music was to share their earbuds with one another—one for me, one for you—so that each kid had a speaker in only one ear. Sharing was a clear expression of existing friendship and provided opportunities for establishing new friendships. Listening together presented everyday physical challenges. Walking together while sharing earbuds involved careful coordination of two bodies, and friends would even spend time practicing especially difficult tasks like walking through doors together. In groups pairs of friends would listen with one ear as they participated in the dense overlap of talk, touch, and gesture that characterized their unmonitored peer interactions. Wires literally tethered kids to one
another, and headphone cables suspended from ear to ear traced out the intersecting nodes of social networks stratified by overlapping hierarchies of age, gender, kinship and friendship, status, and taste. By sharing earbuds kids activated and delineated these relationships, excluding some children from listening even while expanding access for others who might be limited by parental resources or restrictions. Compact little objects—much like toys—MP3 players were ever-present throughout the school day, slipped into pockets, threaded under clothing, and handled until worn. MP3 players bundled with headphone cables circulated among lockers, desks, pockets, and backpacks. Wires threaded under clothing and tangled across crowded lunchroom tables. Hanging from a shoulder or shirt collar, maxed-out earbuds strained to liven up group spaces with portable, lo-fi background music. In class, students listened surreptitiously to earbuds concealed in sleeves and under the hoods of sweatshirts.

Media, language, and poetics

The structure of kids’ media coincided use with and shared many features with the structure of their talk and expression. Media consumption and talk both shared an emphasis on dense, layered, and interactive sociability; audio and oral channels of communication were first and foremost charged with an intimate indexicality that pointed to the relations between individuals in interaction. Whether linkage, contest, solidarity, or negotiation, the channels of communication, and the relationships those channels indexed, seemed more important than the content. Just as MP3 players neatly fit into existing material practices with toys, sound effects and poetic (verbally expressive) tropes from games and TV built nicely
on existing childish repertoires of hoots, howls, growls, and trills that signal pleasure or frustration to peers and adults.

Groups of students would cultivate poetic or musical phrases as social refrains. During the fall middle-school boys sang to themselves “dunna nunna nunna,” to the “dungeon” theme from Nintendo’s Mario Bros video games. Gradually this was incorporated into talk, so one boy demanded another’s lunchtime treat by singing “gimme gimme gimme.” Another kid sang quietly to himself while playing solitaire during an after school program, “monkey monkey monkey,” to the same melody, adding a layer of “silliness” with the non-sequitur animal reference.

One day at lunch in May a few fourth-grade girls started talking about Webkinz, a brand of stuffed toys with a kid-friendly social website tie-in. As a token (and a test) of friendship and trust, one whispered her password to the others. But then they repeated it too loudly—“S-Q-R-3-4”—and she feared it would be compromised. So she chimed in, even louder, with a slightly altered string of letters and numbers: “No that’s not it. It’s S-3-R-Q-1!” The neighboring boys heard this and repeated it, immediately catching on to this game of memorization and poetic contest, and they began themselves to call out letters and numbers too, challenging each other to repeat them back. Soon the table was full of a dozen or so kids talking over one another, repeating and altering complex strings of letters and numbers in a poetic competition linking spelling, numeracy, and childish memory games with the lived tension between adult exhortations to online privacy and youthful conventions of gossip and sharing. Underneath all this, the cable from one girl’s music device snaked across the table,

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7 These are not the actual strings of numbers. I have no intention of publishing my interlocutors’ passwords, of course.
linking her with a friend whose memory she was challenging. Like the headphone cables that passed from ear to ear, these sociable poetics were used to actively negotiate relationships, trust, power, and status, and also to foreground the backchannel, highlighting connectivity, sociability, linkage.

Such peer practices took on particular significance in the institutional context where these interactions occurred. Claiming a rhyme she says she found on Myspace as “my saying,” seventh-grader Jenn would impishly greet her teachers with, “Howdy ho Ranger Joe?” This mischievous borrowing from the Internet put teachers in difficult position. If a teacher challenged her for disrespect, she’d object that, “It’s just what I say”—a motto, or catchphrase. In contrast to kids’ unsupervised interactions in the halls, lunchroom, and playground, in the classroom teachers emphasized individual over interactional competencies. They instructed students in essayist genres of writing (exposition, narrative, personal essay), in the visual formatting of paragraphs and the rules of sentence construction, and in named “problem solving strategies.” These lessons followed a set of goals and procedures laid out in the school’s local “literacy action plan” and in the district’s math curriculum, which in turn implemented standards outlined by the state, in partial response to federal guidelines and funding priorities. Teachers formalized and regulated the ways questions were asked and answered, the one-at-a-time structures of classroom talk, and “respectful” modes for students to address teachers and each other. The writing and speaking practices taught in the classroom competed with the chaotic vocalizations that bubbled up from kids, which were certainly inappropriate, and in their undirected, playful, nonsensical aspects, often inarticulate as well.
Studying popular music and popular music audiences

The broad theoretical “results” of this study, about the place of childhood within institutions of education and entertainment, emerged out of a desire to understand the experience of popular music audiences, using an ethnographic approach. That goal quickly leads to a question of feasibility: how do you investigate popular music consumption in context, when those contexts of music’s consumption are so often distributed and hidden within personal and private spaces. The research site, then, is deeply connected with theoretical questions about the status of individuals in society.

Maureen Mahon writes in an aside to her study of the Black Rock Coalition that “it is relatively easy to identity and get access to potential research subjects who are media consumers. Indeed, most media studies by anthropologists focus on audiences and consumption rather than production” (2004:281n1). But in fact this is not so simple. Media producers can be surrounded by gatekeepers, and their cultural, economic, and institutional status may make it easier for them to decline requests from academic researchers. But while the doors to producers’ offices may often be closed, at least researchers can easily determine which doors to knock on in the first place. Media producers are consolidated geographically and institutionally. By contrast, audiences are dispersed, to the point that research with truly ethnographic detail can seem almost impossible. The doors to audiences’ homes are also closed to researchers, and homes are not publicly available in the way that corporate offices are. Notably, ethnomusicological studies of popular music focus mostly on musicians rather than audiences or media executives, and musicians fit into the category of “producers” rather than “audiences.” Mahon’s own research on the Black Rock Coalition is a case in point: the
coalition provides an institutional structure through which Mahon is able to access musicians of interest to her. And for researchers interested in audiences formal institutions like “fan clubs” can be very useful (e.g., Pecknold 2007; Yano 2002), as are “subcultural” affiliations (Hebdige 1979), and even contemporary forums such as email lists may provide increasingly fine-grained data (Bird 2003). But insofar as they select for individuals with uncommon interest in a particular artist or genre, these institutions do not necessarily provide access to the “everyday” experiences of mass audiences. It is an unfortunate reality that canonical everyday sites of music consumption and performance—the car radio during the morning commute, singing in the shower—are likely to remain closed to ethnographic field research. Focus groups, surveys, and interviews of randomly sampled individuals are wonderful tools, but anthropologists know that they produce different sorts of data than long-term ethnographic field research does. None of this should be understood as critical of the studies cited above, each of which has had a profound influence on my thinking. But these studies circle around my questions about the dispersed everyday experience of music for casual listeners, a question that is, in part personal: while it may sound like a funny thing for a professional ethnomusicologist to say, my own interest in music has always been decidedly casual, and I have never experienced a long-term commitment to a role as performer, fan, or critic. Still, music has a profound role in my life, despite the fact that I rarely listen to it or perform it. That experience—apparently contradictory—of music mattering immensely, but not enough to focus significant time or effort on, is what motivated me to pursue ethnomusicological study. My experience is reflected in the interviews in the My Music volume (Crafts et al. 1993), but as rich as they are, those interviews have always seemed to
me to outline to beginning, not the conclusion, of a research topic. My scholarly goal has been to find some way to explore, in ethnographic detail and with attention to historical and social contexts, these experiences where music is powerfully important for participants, but is not necessarily the focus or motivation for their activities.

The inclusion of “ethnographic detail” in this requirement is not simply an artifact of my disciplinary training, but has substantive implications for the sorts of questions that can be asked and answered. The details of chapters 3–6 speak for themselves in demonstrating that there are types of data that long-term, intensive, and qualitative research techniques produce that simply cannot be achieved through other means. I would not even know to ask about sharing earbuds, connecting MP3 players to kids’ material culture, or locating portable music devices within the expressive ecology of school—practices that I argue have great meaning for how we understand children’s approaches to school and media—had I not witnessed the quiet prominence of these activities in the small everyday details of kids’ lives at HCS. But “ethnography” brings its own set of assumptions about human experience, most notably that the activities or interpretations under investigation will be, at least to some extent, bounded in space and time. The element of ethnographic research that binds its subjects to places is increasingly problematized by anthropologists interested in translocal and deterritorialized practices (Gupta and Ferguson 1997), but disentangling the emplaced method of research from its implications about how humans organize themselves spatially is difficult at best. Additionally, multi-sited ethnographies or other approaches to studying practices that are not

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8 Marc Perlman, reviewing My Music, makes a similar point: “We badly need a study of musical taste that combines My Music's attention to detail with panoramic views of the social, economic, and historical context” (1993).
bounded geographically can create their own artifacts, notably emphasizing practices whose interest is predetermined by the researcher—mediated communication, say, or travel, or trade—rather than locating particular practices holistically within the overall context of individuals’ lives.

In a sense, my concern about studies of popular music is the same: they run the risk of asserting the importance of music in participants’ lives, simply because that is the topic under investigation, rather than investigating as an important and primary question whether music is important. Thus, for completely understandable reasons, people for whom music matters are privileged in music scholarship, whereas the empirical possibility that music might be unimportant to people would seem to be just as relevant to scholars of music as the reverse. Again, this is not to say that spaces that are organized around music should ignored; rather, investigating such spaces has much to tell us about music and about society (Small 1998), and even about practices of circulation and performance that transcend spatial bounds (Novak 2008). And some spaces may not be explicitly organized around music, but music is inescapably central to their sociality. The honky-tonk at the center of Aaron Fox’s (2004) study is an interesting case: the fact that it is a venue for live music may not determine the centrality of country music talk, performance, and listening to its sociality, so much as the intimate mediations of music, language, and expression in the social life of its clientele give meaning and importance to the live performances. If we imagine Ann’s Other Place as a location not organized primarily around music, then the importance of music in its sociality is much more notable. This is the sort of perspective I would like to take toward elementary and middle school as a site for ethnomusicological research: if we start with institutions,
communities, or spaces whose initial constitution has *nothing* to do with music, then the constant presence of musical practice in the everyday life of such institutions—to the extent, as I attempt to show in this dissertation, that even the fundamental activities of the institution, such as, in this case, literacy education, are implicated in this bubbling up of particular orientations toward music—*then* the role of music in everyday life, in relations of power and authority, might reveal itself as even more remarkable than we could ever have imagined. This project, therefore, began with a desire to better understand music in everyday life, and became, of necessity, a study of the institutions—school, commerce, and childhood—in which music takes on meaning in everyday life.

**Childhood**

Finally, the earlier claim that childhood might be something greater than just chronological age merits further discussion, especially because this dissertation is intended, in part, for an audience of music and media scholars for whom “childhood” is likely unfamiliar as an analytical category. In the next chapter I provide an extended exploration of the importance of this view of childhood to institutional arrangements of schooling and education, but I take the opportunity here to diverge somewhat from the topical focus of this project to outline the broader philosophical and theoretical perspective on childhood that informs this dissertation. I start from the premises of the “new social studies of childhood” (James, Prout, and Jenks 1998), which acknowledges children as actors in their communities and agents in the production of their roles and relationships. This model moves away from universal, developmental models that depoliticize children and childhood while silencing
children’s own ideas and interests in what childhood is and should be. From this perspective, “childhood” is a socially constructed category of identity that intersects with gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, disability, and sexuality (Prout and James 1990), and children are seen to co-construct their roles and relationships in expressive interactions with peers and adults (Jacoby and Ochs 1995; Goodwin 2006).

This social constructionist model of childhood distinguishes biological immaturity from the specific social and cultural forms that childhood takes throughout history and around the world—by analogy to a distinction between (social) gender and (biological) sex. It may be that assumptions about the ontological integrity of biological immaturity invite a critique similar to that Butler addresses to the sex-gender distinction (1990), but for my purposes Prout and James’s framework provides a strong enough basis to maintain that childhood, like gender, is the performative accomplishment of individual children (see also Austin, Dwyer, and Freebody 2003). Prout and James criticize psychological models of children’s development that—under the guise of empiricism—propose normative scripts along which all children should progress, all the while inscribing a binary of nature versus culture, whereby biologically determined infants are gradually socialized into cultural and autonomous adults. Such claims about universal patterns in childhood—and therefore human—progress uncomfortably resemble evolutionist models of cultural hierarchies that have been subject to powerful critique (Fabian 1983). Nonetheless such developmental/evolutionist views of childhood continue to permeate ethnomusicological, folkloristic, and educational scholarship on children’s expressive practices long after being rejected for other groups (Minks 2002; K. Marsh 2008). The assumption that children follow
a single, universal script in their development automatically denies their capacity for culturally specific childhood traditions, histories, and subcultures. Furthermore, developmental models of childhood contribute to racist, sexist, and primitivist discourses by providing scientific authority to perspectives that infantilize stigmatized groups (Stephens 1995).

Objections that children eventually become adults, and so childhood is not like other categories of identification which are stable, permanent, and definitive, only reinscribe essentializing discourses of identity that scholars of race and gender have persuasively dismantled (Radano 2003; Butler 1990). Identities are not fixed, though they may have a phenomenal stability for many (Hall 1996). Neither are childhood identities fixed, but the apparent transience of childhood does not make childhood any less powerfully determining of children’s social status and self-conception. Rather, “temporality” is precisely the discursive terrain on which childhood is constructed, as a period of rapid transition along a determined trajectory toward adulthood, toward the future, toward stable identities, toward full-fledged social participation, etc.—but always toward (James and Prout 1990; J. Cole and Durham 2008b). The construction of childhood is one of constant displacement from the present to the future; hence one prominent slogan of childhood scholars demands children be understood not simply as “becomings” but also as “beings” in their own right (Qvortrup 1994), because the hegemonic vision of childhood is so powerfully temporalizing it denies children any claim to present, rather than future, identities. Ironically, this moves inverts Stuart Hall’s intervention that cultural identities are more a “process of becoming rather than being” (1996). A middle ground is desirable (Prout 2000; Lee 2001).
The corollary of claims that childhood is naturally transient and characterized by unremitting change is the unsustainable privilege placed on “adulthood” as stable and unchanging (Blatterer 2007; Cook 2011). Such a position is purely ideological, and does not stand up to scrutiny. Even if we grant that rates of change decrease, it is certainly the case that individuals occupy social roles differently during young adulthood, middle age, and old age, and the boundaries of adulthood change dramatically across history and geography (see, e.g., Swyers 2009). We should also be attentive to the ideological value placed on stable adulthood as a key element in the Western project of delineating a rational subject suitable for citizenship and economic autonomy. This subject is the sort of being who can “make promises” (Nietzsche [1887] 1989), that is, present his or her identities and actions as stable and predictable into the future. To convincingly produce adulthood as stable or unchanging—that is, to develop the ideological basis of contemporary Western society—requires the simultaneous identification of an “Other”: the constantly changing and unpredictable child.

Therefore, childhood is admittedly unlike race, class, or gender, in that its processes of social differentiation are indexed specifically to time, but this is no different than pointing out that race and gender are distinct because (to simplify drastically) the one articulates to skin color and population while the other involves reproductive organs and sexuality. Applying the analytical term “identity” to these various categories precisely highlights commonalities among them; so to include childhood as a category of identity is to suggest these similarities with other, more thoroughly studied, such categories—not to obscure meaningful differences. Recognizing that just as race, gender, and class vary in relation to
one another, they also shift across the life course, we ought to include age within frameworks of “intersectionality” (McCall 2005): gender identities may well shift for individuals who become parents; “young black man” may have a different political resonance than “old black man”; or the imputed asexuality of children and the elderly highlights fundamental changes in individuals’ sex and gender roles across the life course, with profound implications for their social status and well-being (as pointed to by issues of child sexual abuse or the social—and therefore sexual—isolation of elderly people in the contemporary U.S.)

The discourses of intimacy, domesticity, and privacy that characterize children are very similar to discourses that (continue to) exclude women from full public participation, and the feminist critique that the family, home, and private life are fundamentally political (Nussbaum 2000) ipso facto applies to these aspects of childhood. That is, insofar as it is tied up with the family, itself a political institution, childhood is inherently political. Similarly, political discourses that infantilize racial minorities, colonial subjects, or working-class people as childlike and therefore dependent necessarily inflect childhood with political meaning. One useful approach for understanding childhood comes by analogy with theories of disability. For starters, the discourses of childhood and disability explicitly overlap in many ways. Disability is frequently articulated using the language of childhood development, so terms like “retardation” identify a pause in a course of cognitive and psychological development that “normal” children pass through. Therefore, the presence or absence of

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9 To a meaningful extent, the politics of the private sphere might be seen to stem originally from childhood as a fundamental problem for liberal societies interested in individual freedom and autonomy. Childbearing and childrearing are much thornier problems for liberal feminism—and therefore for liberalism—than the (relatively) straightforward claims of equal rights and demonstration of equal capacities. To put it plainly: once every adult is free, autonomous, and equal, someone still has to bear and raise the children.
“capacities” or “faculties” that are monitored and contested in disputes over disabled people’s rights to public access or political enfranchisement are at least discursively positioned as identical to the “aptitudes” and “achievements” that are measured in education and psychological assessments of children. That cognitive faculties are definitive of “personhood” and therefore of basic rights is a controversial but also commonplace claim (e.g., Singer 1994), and the view that cognitive ability (under the catchall “rationality”) is the ideal test for “citizenship” extends back at least to Aristotle, and includes the “rational-critical” discourse that modern philosophers such as Habermas see as central to democracy. Arguments from activists and scholars of disability suggest that the limits of disabled people’s ability cannot be assumed (Bérubé 2003), and examples of rather able children similarly suggest that cognitive ability is not at all adequately indexed by age.

Pointing to all of these commonalities between various formations of marginal or stigmatized social identities, I am not so much interested in arguing that children, like women, racial minorities, or even disabled adults are unfairly excluded from the level of political participation that their actual capabilities would suggest for them, and that therefore the clear “solution” is to enfranchise them.10 Instead, my view is, broadly, that children are philosophically difficult (Schapiro 1999), and that difficulty can be intellectually productive. Thinking through childhood in terms of politics and identity might lead toward substantive progress in the relatively recent project of problematizing dominant views that prioritize rational participation in political deliberation as the ultimate marker of full membership in a

10 Though “minors” have made such political demands in the past (T. Cole 2010), and the view that children and teenagers should have access to channels for democratic participation has been gaining attention, recently (e.g., Hart and Atkins 2011; Rehfel 2011; Van Bueren 2011). See the discussion in chapter 2 of the politics of childhood.
(political) community, when, instead, necessity, dependence, and intimacy are often key values of human life and community (Nussbaum 2006). On the one hand, Nussbaum’s critique of social contract theories of society and justice applies directly, if not explicitly, to children. But I think there may be even more here. While it is well beyond the scope of this dissertation, I want to suggest the outlines of a critique that sees children not simply as specific problems for theories of political participation, in the way that mentally disabled individuals or nonhuman animals figure in Nussbaum’s account. The problem identified for contract theories of social justice involves the exclusion of women, racial minorities, disabled people, or nonhuman animals from social life, such that these individuals are simply invisible to the proposed regimes of social relations. But even within contract theories, children are not simply hidden within the private sphere of the family that is somehow untouched by the social contract; rather, they are central concerns for such contractarian visions, even if only because of their future adulthood, such that education is seen as a key element of justice (e.g., Rawls 2001). The universality of childhood, therefore, does not neutralize it as a category of identity and social difference; rather, the universal experience of childhood, and the ready acknowledgement of childhood by contract theorists as a period of dependency and nonparticipation, inscribes need, dependence, and care into the core of political theories that purport to bracket off such concerns.

Childhood, in this telling, is the Other, the primordial difference, inherent to Western ideologies of an autonomous, rational, and equal subject. Whereas political participation might be progressively expanded to previously excluded groups such as women or racial

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11 See, for instance, Nussbaum’s discussions of “issues of fairness in the relations among family members” (2006:106).
minorities who can empirically demonstrate their fitness, and categorically unfit individuals such as the disabled or animals are simply excluded from the theory altogether, children are both of these things: necessary participants in a social contract if only by their future status as adults, but categorically excluded from that participation at the same time.

The question again is around temporality. How much is it worth worrying about that exclusion if everyone “has” a childhood and will eventually be an adult? But that’s exactly the point: children can’t be argued away. The simple fact that all of our communities are chock full of children who are subject to public institutions (who can’t be hidden behind the fiction of the family as a voluntary private institution) positions dependence and care as fundamental, primary values, even within contractarian views of society as ideally composed of voluntary, rational, independent participants. The point here is not to privilege childhood as an essential category of human dependence, but rather to see its irreducible dependence reflected in other “adult” roles and relationships, and to recognize the importance of necessity, dependence, and intimacy in every aspect of society. Therefore, rather than relying on moral intuitions that excluded groups merit inclusion in our models of society as the motivation for challenging existing theories, I suggest that once we activate age as a meaningful category of social differentiation it quickly becomes clear that need, dependence, and inequality cannot even be written out of contract theories that try so hard to base their account of social justice on voluntary and reciprocal relations among equals.

Ultimately, in this dissertation, I am interested less in sorting out these abstract analytical claims about childhood and political philosophy than in examining actually existing meanings of childhood in the lives of children and adults. That childhood might plausibly be
understood through theories of politics and identity is only meaningful insofar as childhood *actually is* experienced as a political identity. Therefore, in this project, I look especially to instances where children perform or express relations of solidarity with other children *as children*—that is, situations where individuals articulate themselves as members of a group of children, rather than as, say, an ethnic group, or a gender identity, or a family unit, or a geographical affiliation. In chapter 1, then, I consider in detail how childhood in this sense has long been a central element in the constitution of schools, with strong and interesting connections to the ways that class, gender, and ethnicity are articulated in educational institutions. In chapter 2, I point to what seems to be an emerging expression of solidarity among children in and through the mass media. And in the ethnographic focus of chapters 3–5, I attend in fine-grained detail to how children perform something like this solidarity in their everyday interactions with peers, adults, and media in school.

**Chapter summary**

Chapter 1, “Where Are the Childhoods in the Anthropology of Education? An Expressive Practices Approach to Intimacy and Instrumentality,” reviews linguistic, anthropological, folkloristic, and ethnomusicological literature on schools, expressive practices, and childhood to argue that childhood (in the terms outlined above) is a central organizational focus of educational institutions. I build on an influential “expressive practices” approach to the social reproduction of class, gender, and ethnicity in schools, extending this model to include the social production of childhood roles and identities. I establish “instrumentality” and “intimacy” as a key frame for understanding how expressive practices are linked to social
relationships, to argue that the expressive practices of children’s peer cultures are characteristically “intimate” in their linguistic features and social embeddedness, by contrast with the instrumental approaches to language and communication characterized by classroom routines and literacy education. This contrast between instrumental and intimate modes of interaction and expression provides an important basis for understanding children’s practices around entertainment media and digital technologies in later chapters. This chapter also presents an overview of research on children’s expressive traditions, and develops key themes (peer culture, phantasmagoria, and play) that are considered in relation to media and technology in later chapters.

Chapter 2, “Children’s Music, ‘Tweens,’ and Identity (Politics),” addresses developments in the children’s entertainment and consumer industry over the last decade, with special reference to the explosion of popular music offerings for children. I establish the cultural and historical background of industry changes since the 1980s, including the prominence of television brands like Nickelodeon and the development of the increasingly powerful marketing demographic, “tweens.” I identify a complex dynamic in which, on the one hand, music for children is increasingly “mature,” as brands like Kidz Bop directly market mainstream Top 40 music to children, while on the other hand “mainstream” popular music increasingly foregrounds child artists, where acts from the Disney Channel are especially prominent. Pointing to highly visible examples of conflict in the encounter between tween and adult performers, I argue that the expanding market of entertainment for children represents an emerging “counterpublic” of child consumers who are represented, and represent themselves, through tropes of marginality, authenticity, and solidarity characteristic
of previous identity politics movements. Understanding children’s consumption through the
model of publics and counterpublics provides an important framework for theorizing media
consumption in school as the expression of conflicting visions of children’s public
participation.

Chapter 3, “Earbuds Are Good for Sharing: Intimate Connections and the Social
Economy of Children’s Headphone Use in School,” brings this consideration of children’s
performances of peer group solidarity into ethnographic focus at Heartsboro Central School,
presenting a detailed analysis of children’s practices of sharing earbuds with friends and
peers. Earbud cables stretched from one ear to another visibly trace out complex networks of
social relationships. Portable music technologies, in this telling, are prominently involved in
mediating face-to-face relationships among schoolchildren, and the social links they
articulate provide an intimate environment for interaction and connection that is largely
closed to adults. I argue that these face-to-face interactions using digital audio technologies
problematises theoretical perspectives from two fields: First, a prominent view of sound
technologies as progressively isolating individuals from one another fails entirely to account
for children’s practices. Second, while approaches to portable communication technologies
increasingly do privilege communication among intimates, they nonetheless continue to
neglect the face-to-face connections that these devices afford, and are almost entirely
unconcerned with portable music listening as a central practice of “new media,” accepting
uncritically the view from music and sound studies that portable music is necessarily
isolating. I argue that the opposite seems to be true, at least for children, and music devices,
far from being exceptions to the hyper-connected social environments of new media, provide
a perspective for locating those connections in materially and spatially grounded face-to-face relationships.

Chapter 4, “Tinkering and Tethering: MP3 Players and Children’s Material Culture,” considers MP3 players at HCS from a “material culture” perspective. This approach reveals that children emphasized the tangibility of their MP3 players as objects more than as devices for communication or data storage. I argue that children’s MP3 players have been thoroughly domesticated within an intimate and “childish” material culture already characterized by playful physical interaction and portable objects such as toys, trading cards, and dolls that can be shared, manipulated, and held close. Children’s emphasis and interest in the materiality of their devices has implications for understanding their conceptions of sound, music, and circulation. It also provides an important link for understanding how MP3 players are incorporated as authentic elements in existing cultures of childhood, and thus inflected with the peer cultural solidarity that characterizes children’s expressive culture in schools.

Chapter 5, “Intimate Media and Sociality in the Classroom,” considers MP3 players and related devices when students use them, usually secretly, in the classroom. I consider how girls’ and boys’ view the conflict between media consumption and learning in class. I also examine boys’ uses of portable video game devices as an important comparison with MP3 players. Contrasting discourses of “multitasking” as problematic or beneficial from boys and girls suggest that each group sees media practices as deeply tied up in their social identities in school.

Chapter 6, “Inappropriate and Inarticulate: Portable Media Devices and Expressive Practices in School,” examines how interactions using music devices are part of an
expressive tradition that, like their material practices, can also be understood as “childish,” which is engaged primarily with the bureaucratic organization of language and communication in school. I argue that music listening, despite being wordless, is an important part of children’s intimate expressive repertoires. I propose understanding these modes of music listening through reference to certain master tropes of intimate peer expression in school: inappropriateness and inarticulateness. I consider several examples where music listening practices make clear reference to the bureaucratic and authoritative context of school to argue that music consumption should not be understood as a phenomenon separate from schooling, but rather is intimately tied up with schooling. Identifying music listening as an element of these interactional and communicative frames grounds popular music listening and consumer culture in everyday expressive practices, and provides a key perspective for linking bureaucratic networks of educational institutions to the emerging public presence of children in commercial culture, through the small-scale, everyday activities of children in school.

In the conclusion I argue that children’s in-school media use does not involve the intrusion of foreign consumer culture into education, but rather that historically and culturally grounded traditions of peer cultural solidarity provide a context into which entertainment media practices fit naturally. A seeming opposition between education and consumer culture is seen to be a constitutive dialectic, which helps explain the politicization of children’s peer cultural practices in school. Consumer culture, understood in terms of emerging tween counterpublics, represents the extension of dynamics from school into the
wider public sphere; the invasion of these practices into schools is only a natural return to original fields of conflict between children and adults.
Chapter 1

Where Are the Childhoods in the Anthropology of Education? An Expressive Practices Approach to Intimacy and Instrumentality

Scholarship about education and scholarship about childhood substantially overlap in their topics, and would seem to be naturally aligned. Childhood research is often conducted in schools, and anthropologists and scholars of education frequently study children as they go about the situated activity of schooling. But, surprisingly, studies of childhood rarely make explicit the central role of educational discourses and practices in the production of childhood identities, and, similarly, anthropologists of education rarely address the ideologies about childhood and youth that are central to schools’ missions and practices. The goal of my dissertation is to argue that schools are an important site of consumer practice and of the production of childhood roles and identities, and, conversely, that childhood is an idea that is central to the organization and constitution of educational institutions. Key to this synthesis is an argument that the social institutions of schooling and childhood are mutually constituted; each fundamentally depends on the other. Therefore this chapter explores how models of the reproduction of social difference through school expressive practices can be usefully extended to understand how expressive practices in school are involved in constructing identities of children and adults. Ultimately, by identifying expressive practices as key to the social organization of schools, I hope to provide a hook so that, in later chapters, I can
explore how the pair schooling-childhood is mediated by a third element: entertainment media and consumer practice.

I begin by examining several ethnographic studies of class reproduction in high schools to identify the processes through which contrasting and conflicting repertoires of expression and communication are centrally involved in social stratification, focusing on the work of Paul Willis, Douglas Foley, and Penelope Eckert. These authors identify a particular “instrumental” communicative style associated with schools—and by extension with bureaucratic, bourgeois, management or “systems” communication broadly—that they link to “mental labor” (Willis), “instrumental speech practices” (Foley), and “school’s corporate practice” (Eckert). Each work argues that minority, working-class, and otherwise stigmatized populations construct oppositional identities (and are constructed as marginal or stigmatized in institutional discourse) through their rejection of such bureaucratic communicative modes and adoption of some contrasting or alternate communicative styles that can be characterized as emphasizing social relationships and community. I link these studies to formal linguistic and ethnomethodological studies of classroom question-answer interactional frameworks and “objectifications” of knowledge, to identify an opposition between “contextualized” and “decontextualized” language (specifically turning on the relative indexicality of utterances) in school, formalizing the suggestions of Willis, Foley, and Eckert, and linking their broad conclusions to the small-scale language practices of classroom settings. I argue for grouping these parallel analyses together and propose the terms “instrumental” and “intimate” to characterize the expressive practices that index bureaucratic culture on the one hand, and oppositional cultures on the other.
Next I argue that these studies of social stratification through opposition to instrumental communicative modes in schools neglect a category of central importance to the social organization of schools: “childhood.” I explore how ideas and practices related to childhood are central to schooling, and I return to classroom question-answer frameworks to see how they situate students in classrooms as “children.” I briefly summarize recent arguments that “childhood” is a socially constructed category of identity and point to the ideological hegemony of “developmental” models of learning in educational practices. Noting the models of social difference proposed by Foley and Eckert, I argue that children and childhood bear many of the traits that produce groups as marginal in capitalist societies, particularly if we look to the expressive practices and traditions that link children to one another. Exploring several studies of children’s expressive practices in school suggests that they produce “childish” expressive communities in opposition to school’s instrumental practices. Thus I argue for understanding the social construction of childhood in schools through appeal to the same framework of intimate and instrumental expressive contrasts that others have used to understand gender, class, and ethnic differentiations.

Expressive practices, schooling, and the social reproduction of inequality

As in any governmentally chartered institutional setting, in schools the everyday “tactics” of individual teachers and students encounter bureaucratic “strategies” (Certeau 1984) for regulating and structuring social practices, producing educational institutions as complex sites of competition among both individuals and class segments. Anthropological studies of schooling and class stratification find in particular that class hierarchies reproduce
themselves across generations as students from different family backgrounds orient differently to schools’ bureaucratic goals (Willis [1977] 1981; Foley 1990; Eckert 1989). Willis, Foley, and Eckert each identify students’ expressive culture as a central site in producing their orientations toward schooling, linking broad markers of style like clothing and musical genres with fine-grained patterns of speech (Eckert 1996). To strengthen my efforts at understanding children’s everyday practices of media consumption as a central practice in the social organization of school, I provide a detailed reading of Willis, Foley, and Eckert to firmly establish the links between institutional and expressive cultures.

**Willis**

Paul Willis’s account of a group of working-class “lads” at a 1970s English high school frames class struggle in school in terms of contrasting values of mental and manual labor. Willis’s account has been critiqued as too deterministically Marxist in its approach to the construction of stable class cultures (Foley 1990), but I pull out threads from his study that gesture toward an expressive and emergent account of social differentiation. I hope to preserve Willis’s focus on the mediations of large- and small-scale social practices that contribute to historical processes of social differentiation, while investigating in closer detail the everyday expressive practices that mediate those structures. That is, where Willis emphasizes mental and manual labor in his analysis, my reading sees expressivity as central to that binary.

Willis argues that class divisions are produced by the bureaucratic organization of school, and that through students’ orientation toward the value of schooling—and especially the
value of different modes of language use associated alternately with school and friendship—
young people position themselves for different roles in the adult workplace. These
orientations are produced primarily through values about forms of work and modes of
practices, such that the lads maintain “a deep seated skepticism about the value of
qualifications [i.e., degrees] in relation to what might be sacrificed to get them: a sacrifice
ultimately, not of simply dead time, but of a quality of action, involvement, and
independence” ([1977] 1981:126). Willis writes that “mental work demands too much, and
encroaches—just as the school does—too far upon those areas [especially sociable talk and
joking] which are increasingly adopted as their own, as private and independent.” Hence
students’ orientation to a particular communicative practice associated with school manifests
as an orientation toward bureaucratic authority, as “mental labour henceforth always carries
with it the threat of a demand for obedience and conformism. Resistance to mental work
becomes resistance to authority as learnt in school” ([1977] 1981:103). In Willis’s model,
such small-scale processes of everyday skepticism and opposition to school culture ramifies
into broader social structures: “The specific conjunction in contemporary capitalism of class
antagonism and the educational paradigm turns education into control, (social) class
resistance into educational refusal, and human difference into class division” ([1977]

Though Willis suggests that the lads actively choose their futures as manual laborers, he
argues that this is not because they value manual labor as such. Rather, ironically, it might be
said that the lads so value the independence of their mental practices—language, joking,
trash talking, etc.—that they are unwilling to cede control of them to the authority of a
bureaucratic school or white collar workplace, preferring on principle to submit their bodies
to the estrangements of labor. Thus, the specific terrain of conflict between working-class
and bureaucratic cultures is not an opposition between mental and manual labor, but between
differing values within mental activity itself—particularly a willingness or not to commodify
one’s mental activities as estranged labor.

These contrasting values of mental work manifest as stylistic differences between
expressive repertoires. Thus the conflict between the lads and their school occurs as sociable
communicative forms like jokes and insults contrast with the “abstract” language of
education. Comparing the stylistic similarities of shopfloor and counter-school expressivity,
Willis links the lads’ expression with the broader masculine working-class culture of 1970s
England:

the distinctive form of language and highly developed intimidatory humor of the
shopfloor is also very reminiscent of counter-school culture. Many verbal exchanges
on the shopfloor are not serious or about work activities. They are jokes, or “pisstakes,”
or “kiddings,” or “windups.” There is a real skill in being able to use this language with
fluency: to identify the point on which you are being “kidded” and to have appropriate
responses ready in order to avoid further baiting. ([1977] 1981:55)

Suggestively outlining the characteristics of working-class expressivity, Willis then draws a
contrast with the bourgeois and bureaucratic expressive style of schools:

Part of the reaction to the school institution is anyway a rejection of words and
considered language as the expression of mental life. The way in which these creative
insights are expressed, therefore, is one of expressive antagonism to the dominant
bourgeois mode of signification—language. In a real sense for the working-class the
cultural is in a battle with language. This is not to reduce the cultural to anti-abstract
behaviour. It is to posit it, in part, as an antagonistic way of expressing abstract and
mental life centered, not on the individual subject, but on the group: not on the
provided language but on lived demonstration, direct involvement, and practical
Willis’s attribution of “language” as a whole to “dominant bourgeois mode of signification” is too strong, as jokes certainly make use of “words.” The useful contrast here is between styles of language use: abstract or considered language on the one hand, and joking, humorous, and demonstrative communication that is embedded in social participation, on the other. As I will argue in detail later in this chapter, we can see Willis’s “abstract language” as a recognizable and persistent style of communication that can be seen in many educational settings, which has distinctive linguistic and interactional features and can be accounted for through careful analysis.

**Foley**

Douglas Foley’s approach to similar questions about the social organization of schooling draws out in more detail the communicative and expressive characteristics of class struggle. Foley objects to Willis’s mental/manual framework on the grounds that it is too classically structural Marxist, but here Foley’s critique misses or ignores Willis’s emphasis on a working-class imperative to maintain their expressive/mental practices as a privileged site of freedom from bureaucratic alienation. In place of the deterministic Marxian class stratification that he (mis)reads in Willis’s account, Foley turns to Habermas (1984) for a model of capitalist culture that is characterized by particular communicative practices: in particular, the “instrumental communication” and “technological rationality” that spill over from increasingly powerful bureaucracies into everyday life (a “systems” world that colonizes the “life-world”). Foley articulates Habermas’s model through the lens of class culture, arguing that instrumental communication is not distributed homogeneously, but is a
marker of class segmentation—that is, Foley proposes that “instrumental speech practices, that is, the logic of capital, are more characteristic of the bourgeois/petty bourgeois class than of the proletariat” (1990:175). Foley’s effort to “to redefine class cultures as alienated communicative labor and qualitatively different types of speech practices” (1990:170) further reframes Willis’s approach to emphasize expression and communication, while building on Willis’s intimation that certain types of abstract language (alienated communicative labor) index bourgeois and bureaucratic subjectivities.

Foley grounds his adaptation of Habermas’s instrumental communication in Erving Goffman’s performance perspective, to construct a “‘situational speech performance’ concept of class cultures”: “Dramaturgically, class groups are socialized to use distinct styles of speech. They select a speech style that fits the general social identity that ‘normal’ society bestows upon them and marks the performers’ social status” (1990:179). Foley emphasizes the manipulations and concealment that Goffman’s analysis reveals in everyday interactions, linking this to the pattern of instrumental communication in which “people increasingly treat each other like objects to be managed rather than free and equal expressive subjects” (1990:172). So, whereas neither Goffman nor Habermas address the distribution of access to instrumental or face-saving communicative repertoires across social groups, Foley brings both to bear on the segmentation of class cultures, writing that “one needs to interject critical ideas such as ideal speech and class into the study of everyday communication. We need to explore what else is being constructed besides a smooth-flowing conversation. We need to ask when this type of communication becomes miscommunication that arrests intersubjectivity and reproduces class division” (1990:178).
In pursuit of a theory of “class cultures as situational speech performance of status groups” (1990:178), Foley outlines the characteristics of two expressive styles whose distribution structures the stratification of populations into hierarchically related class segments:

Two generalized class roles are routinely enacted in reoccurring everyday situational speech performances . . . Standard, official speech is authoritative and proper. Proper, polite speech and etiquette can become a strategic weapon in their everyday communication. Such instrumental, manipulative speech practices help preserve the image of bourgeois class privilege as cultural models and as political leaders . . . Unofficial speech is often non-standard, informal, and lacking in politeness forms. Impolite speech becomes an unstrategic form of expressiveness that either meekly enacts the subordinate, stigmatized role of outsider or openly, hostily rejects it. (1990:180)

Foley continues with this outline, providing structural/functionalist reasons for the historical emergence of these different styles:

A more collective organizational context may create speech communities that are generally more context-bound or indexical in character . . . In the end, actors in more traditionalistic, context-bound speech communities judge themselves more by their deeds than by their public situational speech performances. In contrast, more anonymous communicative contexts such as modern suburban communities and corporate work groups are marked by intense individualism, competition, restricted information, and considerable impression management. In such market-like modern speech contexts, the split between public and private self is much greater than in more traditionalistic communities. Such relatively unindexical, ahistorical, anonymous communicative contexts give rise to the greater use of strategic, instrumental speech and impression management. As a result, people in such speech contexts develop greater communicative competencies in instrumental speech and impression management. (1990:184)

With this framework, Foley examines the school culture of working-class and middle-class white and Hispanic high school students in a Texas town. He finds these styles map broadly onto social class (more so than ethnicity), and that the official language practices of schools produce the same sort of “unindexical, ahistorical” contexts and instrumental
practices as other middle-class sites. Further, Foley finds that movement between these styles characterizes social mobility: “The more one is in, or wants to be in, the ‘mainstream,’ the more one uses instrumental communicative practices rhetorically to define and manage social reality” (1990:185). Conversely, like Willis, Foley frames the unwillingness of certain groups to conform to these instrumental practices as a reaction against the “cultural homogenization and administration” by which “a person’s everyday discourse practices become reified,” and through these oppositions communication is politicized: “the appropriation of people’s communicative labor in the cultural sphere is a new level of dehumanization . . . A new reason for revolt emerges, therefore, with the growing theft of communicative labor” (1990:185). Willis’s summary of Foley’s model makes explicit the link between expressive practices, commodification, and “human” relationships:

The commodification of human expressiveness, of the attempted appropriation of all communicative labor . . . is the essential dehumanizing cultural tendency of capitalist societies across the board: humans manage each other and their own performances in the same way they manage the production and circulation of commodities . . . Resistance to this process occurs . . . through class-based speech and communication communities that keep alive human (not reified and alienated) expressive practices. To put the situation in a nutshell, working class and oppressed groups are more likely to treat each other as humans than are bourgeois groups, and to a greater or lesser extent this inoculates them against the commodification of their expressive practices. (Willis 1990:ix)

Eckert

To break the overdetermined and at times essentializing link between speech styles and preexisting class cultures suggested by Willis and Foley (such that, in Willis’s unfortunate
designation, oppressed communities are ultimately more *human* than those in power),¹² I turn to Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (1995), who re theorize school communicative practices in terms of “communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991). Like Willis and Foley, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet find that social differentiation among high-school students is constituted primarily through orientations to the “corporate practice” of school, through categories like “jock” and “burnout” that strongly mark social class affiliations (Eckert 1989): for jocks, “social status is constructed as a function of institutional status, personal identities are intertwined with institutional identities, and social networks are intertwined with institutional networks.” For burnouts, on the other hand, “because they are bound for the work force immediately after high school, . . . the extracurricular sphere has no hold on them as qualification for future success; rather, it appears to them as a form of infantilization and as a hierarchy existing only for its own sake” (1995:474). This differentiated orientation to the school institution is recognizable in the opposition of Willis’s lads to school “conformity” and their focus on future lives as manual laborers, and in the rejection by Hispanic and working-class Texas kids of Foley’s account of the “instrumental” speech practices of school and school’s extracurricular events.

But in contrast to Willis and Foley, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet’s communities of practice approach emphasizes the emergent processes of affiliation and differentiations in everyday expressive practices, arguing that “speech differences are not simply markers of category affiliation. They carry in themselves complex social meanings, like tough, cool,

¹² The idea that the opposite of instrumentality is *humanity* is itself ideologically structured into the constitution of the public sphere: Habermas writes, “In the intimate sphere of the conjugal family private individuals viewed themselves as independent even from the private sphere of their economic activity—as persons capable of entering into ‘purely human’ relations with one another” ([1962] 1989:48).
slutty, casual, or mean, and these meanings are part of the construction of categories like those labeled by female, male, jock, burnout” (1995:500). By noting the complex matrixes of meaning carried through speech practices, we begin to see how the same expressive repertoires that produce social class divisions have implications in the construction of overlapping categories of identity. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet focus on the simultaneous construction of gender identities with class affiliations in their analysis of two marked phonological shifts differentially distributed among the population of their subject school. They find that girls in both groups displayed more of the phonological shift than boys in their same group, and the most extreme variant was used by “burned-out burnout girls” (marking both their gender and their class identities) such that “whatever distinguishes jocks and burnouts also distinguishes boys and girls within those categories” (1995:502). This process of distinction happens in real-time, as individuals imbue speech styles with meaning as they perform them: “in their extreme speech, the burned-out burnout girls are not simply using phonetic variants with a meaning already set . . . Rather, their very use of those variants produces a social meaning. They are simultaneously creating meaning for [the variant] and for being burned-out burnouts” (1995:503). By noting the emergent constructions in expressive speech of overlapping parameters of social difference, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet help to decouple the process of differentiation from the historical or ideological constitution of the groups that are its product, while retaining the critical force of Willis’s and Foley’s examinations of the institutional mediations of expressivity and power relation in schools.
Instrumental language: IRE, objectification, decontextualization, and literacy education

Willis, Foley, and Eckert strongly demonstrate that social class identities are produced through orientations against a particular bureaucratic mode of expression found in schools. But their suggestions as to just what that expressive repertoire consists of are incomplete, so in this section I find it useful to examine school expression more closely. Turning to linguistic studies of classrooms, I identify a collection of discursive practices that persistently structure classroom interactions, in which we can see the detailed constitution of “abstract” and “instrumental” communication. Outlining these characteristics in detail, I attempt to build a careful and clearer framework for identifying how particular expressive practices may orient toward or away from the “corporate practice” of schools. I examine four conventional practices of schooling: (1) IRE (initiation, response, evaluation) frameworks for interaction; (2) objectification and componentiality as orientations to knowledge; (3) “essayist” literacy; and (4) “decontextualized” language. Contestations and negotiations over these frameworks in interactions between teachers and students reveal the constant tensions and attention to power and social organization by classroom participants.

IRE

Classroom interactions appear to be persistently organized in a frame in which interactions are conventionally structured in terms of “initiation, response, evaluation (or feedback)” (IRE)—in which the teacher initiates an interaction, often with a question to which she or he anticipates the correct answer (Mehan 1986), selects a student to respond, and evaluates the response. While IRE is clearly structured in terms of adult/school authority
over both knowledge and the structure of talk, accounts of IRE still identify the necessity of children’s assent and participation for the framework to succeed (Mehan 1979). So despite the clear top-down structure, the conventionality and scriptedness of IRE is always partial. Flattening out social differences between children, IRE frameworks organize adults and children as teachers and students, and through the segmentation and regulation of classroom discourse IRE frameworks orient to facts as discrete and knowledge as componential—embedding ideas about what can or should be learned as well as what types of people teach and learn. And while educators are increasingly concerned with “differentiating” instruction to maximize learning, IRE remains a common and identifiable framework in even progressive classrooms (Austin, Dwyer, and Freebody 2003:26).

**Componentiality and objectification**

Accompanying IRE interactions is an orientation toward knowledge as a set of componential “facts” that are authoritative and separated from their contexts. Massoud and Kuipers, writing about various processes of “objectification,” note that “classrooms in general tend to be places where knowledge is broken down into digestible chunks, often packaged and re-packaged into different forms in relation to the different subjective perspectives of the students” (2008:214). In this framework, objectification is a social and semiotic process, such that “part of the power of objectification comes by its capacity to obscure its own indexical creativity, and to make it appear that it is only encapsulating and representing what is already there, when in fact it is creating something new” (2008:218). So, more than simply ideologies about abstract knowledge, componentiality depends on
participation frameworks like IRE that orient to facts as objects, and pedagogy is geared as much to interactional competence in these frames as to acquisition of specific curricular knowledge: “Close attention is given in classroom talk to what counts as knowledge and what is required in the way of reasoning and presentation of an answer . . . So while the propositional corpus can be thought of as the ‘academic’ or factual lesson knowledge . . . , it includes as well the cultural logic in use in the display of those facts, and the expected ways of behaving and acting in the classroom” (Austin, Dwyer, and Freebody 2003:27).

Seemingly in contrast to these arguments, educators increasingly emphasize “process” in learning, institutionalizing John Dewey’s once-radical philosophy that education should focus on the activities of inquiry, rather than collections of knowledge, and curricula and educational standards now explicitly emphasize scientific method, critical thinking, and problem solving. Ironically, charts and tables listing bullet-pointed “problem-solving techniques” decorate classroom walls and textbook pages, and students are increasingly accountable for labeling the correct procedure for solving a problem in math and science quizzes, in addition to simply identifying the answer—reducing process to one more set of componential knowledge. Even in contexts such as laboratory-based science classrooms, in which “the hands-on technique is supposed to be superior to mere lecturing and reading,” we can observe that “not only is the laboratory procedure an externalization of human capacities for activity . . . , but writing down the results is similarly an externalization of the transformed subjectivity that is supposed to result” (Keane 2008:315). Thus even in an educational focus on “activities,” “the inculcation of habits such as nominalization work to mute the agency of the student . . . , and instead to foreground inscription and objectified
data” (Keane 2008:317). Standard classroom orientations toward componential knowledge are powerful enough that even explicit emphasis by educators on the process and activity of learning is quickly objectified and incorporated.

The concept of objectification quickly approaches the idea of “commodification” in Willis’s and Foley’s accounts, but, unlike those authors, for whom commodification is by definition dehumanizing, for Massoud and Kuipers, “objectification is not inherently bad or good: it happens, and it appears to be a fairly active process in . . . classrooms” (2008:218). Similarly Keane writes that, “in contrast to the romantic critique of objectification as, say, inherently alienating or a violation of self-presence . . . , whether objectification is negative or not is a function of who I am for you and what epistemic status I accord that moment of objectification” (2003:239). Still, “the forms and relative success of objectifications depend on social interactions,” such that “the learning of new concepts and the emergence of new social identities turn out to be inseparable components of a single social and conceptual dynamic” (Keane 2008:313)—and the social identities produced in the classroom are by no means neutral. Objectification in the classroom is particularly oriented to assessment by teachers: “It is only by means of the objectification of students’ knowledge, such as through writing, that teachers can evaluate otherwise imperceptible things like thought, understanding, even character” (Keane 2008:315). This process is alienating in the classic Marxian sense of misrecognizing the products of activity for the social processes of production (Lave and McDermott 2002), and schools’ characteristic orientation toward the componentiality of knowledge are building blocks in administrative systems of assessment and ideologies of “achievement” (Varenne, Goldman, and McDermott 1998).
Essayist literacy

Literacy is a central term in education. The particular solitary, formal, and descriptive writing taught in schools is often termed “essayist” (Poole 2008). In classrooms talk and writing are often opposed as communicative modalities with very different meanings and consequences: “talking is something that causes children to get in trouble more than anything else. Talking provides opportunities for sociability and popularity but also great humiliation; writing can be more solitary, can require more planning, and is often associated with positively sanctioned classroom behavior. Both talking and writing have serious social consequences for students within the classroom, in their relations with other students as well as with the teacher” (Massoud and Kuipers 2008:219). The ideological separation of talk and writing in schools flattens out the different forms each mode actually takes in various social situations (from correctly answering a question when called on to hollering at a friend during recess, or from writing sentence in which the form and content carefully conform to instructions to writing a note for a friend on a scrap of paper without regard for spelling or grammar). While writing “can be viewed as one resource among many available to actors participating in a communicative activity . . . [and] as a skill individuals make use of in some situations but not in others” (Massoud and Kuipers 2008:219), distributed access to and valuation of certain forms of textuality and the actual constitution of specific situations in which writing is or is not used have significant implications for the articulation of social power and identity in schools.
Decontextualization

Deborah Poole links these various interactional and ideological orientations together in her close examination of reading group interactions and essayist literacy (2008). The language of essayist literacy is most often characterized as “decontextualized,” where broad categories of contextualized and decontextualized language have been seen to differentiate between orality and literacy and between talk on the playground and talk in the classroom:

the notions of decontextualization or contextualization as applied to written language typically imply a limited scope of meaning, namely, whether or not a text is linked through linguistic or gestural means to its immediate context or to its author, audience or context of production . . . Hence, a so-called “decontextualized” text is said to be devoid of linguistic features such as first or second person pronominal references to author or audience; such a text is also thought to introduce new entities or phenomena in ways that do not assume prior knowledge, often through linguistic features such as relative clauses or the indefinite article. These characteristics of written text are contrasted with contextualizing features of spoken language such as deictic forms that link an utterance explicitly to its immediate physical or visual context. (2008:379–80)

“Contextualized” in this model maps easily onto “indexicality,” the term Foley uses to describe the language of working-class and traditional groups. Contextualized and decontextualized language, then, would be broadly characterized by the relative presence of, in Peircian terms, indexical or symbolic signs. The parallel here with the process of objectification is notable: as Keane writes, “objectification commonly involves an upshift from indexicals to symbols, that is, from semantically underspecified marks of causal effects in particular contexts to rules that establish repeatable tokens of established sign types” (2008:314). But just as Massoud and Kuipers point out that objectification often obscures its own “indexical creativity,” Poole is careful to point out that “decontextualized” is not a perfectly descriptive label: “these narrow characterizations omit the profound, though less visible, influences of the institutional and sociocultural contexts in which written language is
created and encountered. Moreover, . . . the expectations of decontextualized text themselves provide a powerful dimension of context, though again one which is usually invisible and unacknowledged” (2008:380). That is, essayist literacy is always indexically embedded in social contexts—as a significant literature on “situated literacy” increasingly demonstrates (e.g., Gee 2008)—even if only insofar as language scrubbed of indexicals necessarily points to an institutional context that militates such a marked style, and it is important to see “‘decontextualization’ as an ideology of academic literacy rather than an inevitable characteristic of written language or its surrounding talk” (2008:382). Further, Poole argues that decontextualization is “a stance characteristic of some texts and often reflected in associated spoken interaction” (2008:382). Decontextualized language and IRE flatten out the social complexity of individuals in classroom or reading situations while producing new relations between participants (Austin, Dwyer, and Freebody 2003), and they orient to facts that are unique and isolable from one another in a framework of “componentiality”.

From this perspective on decontextualization and componentiality as a stance or orientation of participants, Poole’s analysis of several fifth-grade reading groups finds that no single participation framework characterizes any lesson. Rather, each lesson exhibits a shifting range of student- and teacher-initiated orientations toward texts, contexts, and participants. Some of these orientations—characterized by teacher-initiated IRE segments that focus on “facts” abstracted from the text (usually phrases separated out of the context of their sentences) and do not refer to the other parts of the text, to the text qua writing/print, to illustrations, or to other participants, using little or no indexical language (i.e., a near-complete lack of pronouns)—can be clearly labeled essayist. But “the essayist stance is
sometimes interwoven with a more situationally contextualized and personalized form of language use that seems to resist and counterbalance the first” (2008:400). These forms vary from short disruptions of an IRE segment, to longer discussions of illustrations in relation to their surrounding captions and texts, to student-initiated interactions with peers, to occasional jokes or other comments by the teacher. But in general, Poole writes that “the children often shift the interaction to the more contextualized perspective, seeming to prefer and more naturally orient to it. The teacher, on the other hand, primarily guides the group toward a decontextualized orientation, but also seems to play a role of keeping the two in balance; i.e., whenever the interaction seems to veer heavily in one direction, she tends to reorient it to the other” (2008:400). Still, importantly, Poole also points to interactions where students initiate decontextualized orientations and examine the text’s facts abstractly.

**Essayist literacy and instrumentality**

My claim is that IRE, componentiality, and decontextualization describe formally the interactional and linguistic characteristics of the expressive genres that Willis and Foley discuss in terms of “considered language” or “instrumental speech.” As Poole points out the constant slippage in classroom interactional “stances” from IRE and essayist literacy to other, more contextual modes, we can see the mechanics by which even heavily teacher-regulated classroom interactions are always “messy” with multiple, shifting orientations. While there may be particular elements of language and text that characterize these genres (such as lack of deixis in essayist texts), the generalizable conclusion seems to be shared by Foley and Poole, that the contrast exists primarily in the construction of the interactional frame, stance,
Foley’s emphasis on Goffmanian “manipulation,” “face-saving,” and “impression management” might upset this generalization, characterizing his instrumental communication as particularly indexical and attuned to context. This represents a potential disjuncture with IRE and essayist literacy until we remember Poole’s position that decontextualization is an “ideology of academic literacy rather than an inevitable characteristic of written language” (2008:382), and Massoud and Kuipers’s assertion that “part of the power of objectification comes by its capacity to obscure its own indexical creativity” (2008:218). It is not that classroom texts, componential knowledge, or IRE interactions are in fact disembedded from context, but that the claim of being context-free is particularly powerful. For example, James Collins (1996) shows how in third-grade classrooms teachers assess students’ competence as readers in terms of their out-loud production of texts as objectified and decontextualized: “Interruptions and use of local dialect forms are seen as taking away from the autonomy of a text, and hence its authority as an example of ‘good reading.’ ‘Poor readers’ are ones who fail to objectify the text as separate from its social context” (Massoud and Kuipers 2008:217). Naturally these judgments mark against students from minority backgrounds, mapping contextualized and decontextualized language onto community and social group while normalizing dominant modes.

IRE, componentiality, and decontextualization are one extreme node in a school expressive ecology. As Poole shows, even heavily regulated lessons are sites for mixing of multiple interactional frames—so we can see in these complicated interactional environments
how alternative and disputative frames continually emerge and consolidate opposition to authority. What is notable is that the frames that layer with and butt up against decontextualization are more or less the same in Poole’s rather tame fifth-grade reading-group scenarios and the much more explicitly oppositional practices described by Foley, Willis, and in countless other studies of kids’ resistance to schooling: the contrasting term to decontextualized, instrumental language is, in each case, heightened sociability, a turn away from the solitary, linear, and binary focus of pedagogy toward peers and community.

However necessary essayist literacy is to children’s eventual competence and success in bureaucratic adult culture (Willis and Foley see it as central, Poole is committedly agnostic), from the way classrooms organize and regulate students it is clear that “decontextualized” practices are necessarily about power and politics and consent. When kids “resist” such alienated tasks as writing a five-paragraph paper or reading a short text and listing its “facts” in a worksheet, they do not initiate the politicization of the interaction, but are responding in kind to the teacher initiated interaction that are already politicized. Moreover teachers, who, of course, competently joke and interact with students, are not simply bureaucratic automatons. Rather, they accomplish to various extents the bureaucratic strategies of school using the same communicative competencies as everyone else.

**Dialectics of intimacy and estrangement**

All the accounts of schooling so far share a perspective on schools as the agent and symbol of the bureaucratic, instrumental world, and I have proposed that IRE, componentiality, and decontextualization represent the “instrumental” characteristics of
school expression to which groups orient themselves in opposition. Less clear from the various accounts is what, exactly, characterizes the oppositional, or counter-school, orientation. Willis proposes that opposition lies in manual labor and masculine “pisstaking”; Foley finds it in historical speech groups or traditions; Eckert sees it as an orientation toward the community outside of school. In Poole’s smaller-scale account of classroom settings, students oppose classroom instrumentality by simply reframing their participation to include friends and classmates. The common theme in all of these approaches is a shared focus on peer relationships, sociability, and community.

Through Poole’s account, we can see how expressive styles that mark entire groups of people are also emergent in interactions. That children may initiate decontextualized frames and teachers occasionally interject contextualizations suggests that these contrasting styles are not mutually exclusive; nor do certain groups only have access to one or the other. Contextualization and decontextualization are not separate, bounded, coherent repertoires in themselves, but rather they represent a continuum of available orientations that necessarily refer to each other. The ideological stance of decontextualization does not simply require turning toward instrumental language, but also entails turning away from contextual language. And the reverse is true: student orientations to contextualization entail turning away from decontextualization.

This point emerges a bit more clearly if we try to independently examine the different repertoires Foley proposes. If the two orientations are mutually exclusive, they should characterize the expression of entire speech communities. Foley suggests that the indexical, contextual expression of opposition to schooling is located in traditional or historical speech
communities (cultures). This account sees commonalities in various encounters with modernity by traditional people around the world: “various studies of modernity suggest a plausible explanation for why proletarians may be less culturally assimilated in a communicative action sense. In general, low-income proletarian communities seem to retain a more traditionalistic organizational character. The practices of an extended family system and fictive kin are more intact in such communities” (1990:183). Therefore the characteristics of oppositional expression derive from the historical expressive characteristics of bounded, historical speech communities (or, as it were, cultures), whose opposition to modern instrumentality is ultimately conservative or preservationist. We can see this in Feld’s suggestion that Kaluli expressive culture is characterized by a traditional “master trope” of layering and overlapping of forms (“lift-up-over-sounding”) that maps onto the complex (contextual) interactivity of participants in singing, talk, or dance (1988). Feld shows that in situations where Kaluli are asked to perform homophonic missionary music (whose linearity and order seem to index a colonial instrumentality), they resist by claiming lack of capacity (or “inarticulateness,” its own form of power; see McDermott 1988), or they preserve aspects of lift-up-over-sounding in their performances. So on the one hand anthropological accounts such as those Foley points do suggest a traditional origin for contextual stances in school.

In contrast, though, examinations of bureaucratic cultures suggest that, despite the institutional forces that militate toward instrumental language, institutional “strategies” are only ever accomplished through small-scale everyday “tactics” (Certeau 1984)—the instrumental, “systems” world, as it were, depends on intimate interactions and competencies
among the people who produce it. Poole’s account demonstrates this clearly: even teachers tasked with producing the extreme instrumentality of IRE, componentiality, and decontextualization in an essayist literacy class manage the lesson by joking with students, addressing off-topic questions, and variously engaging in “contextual” orientations to the students and the lesson. Similarly, Mertz (1996) shows that in law schools (like primary schools, locations for inculcating canonically “instrumental” orientations toward language, facts, and individuals), the measure of student competence in reading case materials is the ability to situate and perform those materials in applicable contexts, rather than to frame them as abstract and decontextualized. “Good ole boy” networks, connections from elite colleges, or golf outings consolidate power among intimate groups while excluding those with qualifications but without introductions. Berlant writes, in specific reference to 1990s legal controversies over workplace sexual harassment but with broader application, that “again and again, we see how hard it is to adjudicate the norms of a public world when it is also an intimate one, especially where the mixed-up instrumental and affective relations of collegiality are concerned” (1998:282). Thus it is not clear at all that there are any authentic sites of instrumental communication undiluted through continual counterpoint with intimate expressivity—or that the power of “instrumental” practices does not simply lie in its ideological ability to deflect attention from the intimate relationships it disguises.

So we cannot assume the integrity of these communicative repertoires as they associate with groups or institutions. Keane points to a dialectic between epistemologies of “intimacy” and “estrangement”—“closeness” and “separation,” “immediate” and “mediated,” more or less—that is ubiquitous in human practice (2003). Keane’s “estrangement” involves the
objectifications and metalanguages that risk distillation into the bureaucratic “betrayals and reifications” (2003:238) that characterize instrumental communication in modern capitalist contexts. His example involves the oppositionality between scientistic and humanistic orientations to knowledge about social life, where intimacy and estrangement are mobilized as the site of an ideological stance of intellectual distinction. In the case of schools, we can see interactional orientations toward intimacy and estrangement mapping onto orientations to communities and institutions, to modes of communication, to forms of authority, and to larger structural divisions of society into classes and groups. In a fundamental transformation, schools—and, more broadly, institutions of capitalism—take a mundane, horizontal, and everyday axis of immediacy and distance and project it onto a massive, vertical, and historical axis of social stratification and hegemony. Capacities for objectification and decontextualization inherent in language are projected onto social difference and institutional power, and so, in Willis’s formulation, “resistance to mental work becomes resistance to authority as learnt in school” ([1977] 1981:103). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet write that “[social] categories themselves and the opposition between them can become the object of practice, defining a larger but more loosely connected community of practice focused on conflict over the practices of everyday life in the shared space community members inhabit” (1995:472)—and we might see the social organization of late capitalism as just such a community of practice, “focused on conflict over the practices of everyday life.” It may be that some of the specific forms of Hispanic or white Texas working-class or English working-class expression are historically given, but their role within a larger binary expressive ecology is structured by the institutional organization of
people in school. Just as there is no authentic site of timeless traditional culture, there is no pure site of authentic bureaucratic culture.

**Instrumental and intimate expressivities**

In this dissertation I will refer to the binary outlined above in terms of “instrumental” and “intimate.” These terms are already keyed to a dialectical oppositional of contemporary capitalism (Berlant 1998). The emergence of an “intimate sphere” located in the family was a necessary process in the institutionalization of the public sphere (Calhoun 1992:10; Habermas [1962] 1989:28, 48), which itself presupposed the “intimacy” of shared and unmarked whiteness and masculinity (Fraser 1992; Warner 1992). By claiming “intimacy” as the converse term to instrumentality, I hope to establish that sociability, and an emphasis on proximate fellow participants, is the consistent converse of instrumental expressivity. Intimacy, in turning away from “corporate practice,” necessarily refers to it. I focus on intimate and instrumental expressive practices so that, despite the potential to describe large-scale historical and cultural formations, at the core of each term is an assumption about interactions and relationships between individuals.

Further, neither term is necessarily linked to a group of people. Instead instrumentality and intimacy can represent stances toward one situation or another to which any person may or may not have access in any particular situation: just as both the children and adult in Poole’s example each are responsible for initiating essayist or contextualized interactions, each group also clearly has preferences for one style or another. Instead of bounded and determined speech communities, I understand the expressive repertoires of intimacy and
instrumentality in terms of the anthropological concept of language ideologies, by which individuals and communities “envision and enact links of language to group and personal identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology” (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994:55–56)—emphasizing the acts of articulation between expression and identity, rather than preexisting or natural characteristics. Intimate expressive acts need not be deterministically associated with working-class groups; they take on that characterization because they are framed as oppositional by participants in the communicative ecology of institutions like schools.

**Childhood matters in schooling**

When critical studies of schooling continually return to the production and reproduction of class, ethnic, and gender differences, they frame the school’s construction of student subjects as centrally concerned only with differences between students—differentiating student populations into genders, classes, and ethnicities. But schools do not just produce gendered, classed, and ethnic subjects. To bureaucratic institutions explicitly focused on educating neoliberal subjects differentiated only by talent and inclination, gender, class, and ethnicity are unfortunate distractions. Claims of a “level playing field,” of course, are themselves fig-leaves covering up “the thicket of conflicting people crowding institutions of education with long histories” (Varenne, Goldman, and McDermott 1998:107). Triumphant narratives of social progress through educational equity are packaged with increasingly complex procedures for measuring that progress in terms of individual children’s “achievement,” reinscribing implicitly equal (because abstract) subject positions to children
from historically unequal communities: “social forces are returned to the background as the child is made to occupy the foreground for extended comparison with other children” (Varenne, Goldman, and McDermott 1998:107). But while schools work to paper over historical, class, gender, racial, ethnic, sexual, and religious differences, educators, administrators, and policy makers are all explicitly and centrally engaged with another category of person: the “child.” To produce the massive educational bureaucracy we now have involved “installing and regulating a standard, administrable model of the clientele, of the Child . . . , attending to the question of who and what were ‘the young,’ what were their needs, and what did societies need from them?” (Austin, Dwyer, and Freebody 2003:21). It follows that “a crucial plank for these understandings and thus the activities of classrooms is the constitutions of Students as a particular category or type of person, and of students as different types of people—primarily as Children, as that is commonly and institutionally understood” (2003:27). Therefore “schooling can be seen as an important source of knowledge about Childhood, for children . . . Educational practices not only set about providing children with specifications of the category to which they belong, but at the same time rely upon children’s already competent enactments of this category” (2003:8).

To take an example from the discussion above: in its abstract, ideal-typical form, the IRE framework does not admit social class difference between students. In the procedure of initiation, response, and evaluation, each child is positioned as an individual, autonomous,

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13 As Stephens has asked (1995), why refer to “the child” when we might discuss actual “children”? Austin, Dwyer, and Freebody capitalize “Child” along with “Student” and “Teacher” to refer to conventionalized roles that are performed in schools. Their ethnomethodological approach sees these categories constructed in everyday practice, and their “Child” is not the same essentialized category as can be found in, say, psychological or diplomatic discourses.
and equal subject, equivalent to one another in the eyes of the educational bureaucracy.

Flattening out social differences in this way, “management strategies used in classrooms [make] students relevant as a class as opposed to as individuals” (Austin, Dwyer, and Freebody 2003:29). Therefore, in their ethnomethodological study of the production of “children” in classrooms, Austin, Dwyer, and Freebody show that students perform different identities in whole-class versus small group settings: “in interaction with teachers, students ordinarily enacted particular constellations of themselves which made them look like they were somewhat ‘incomplete’ in relation to those teachers—that, as a cohort, they needed the gaze and guidance of the Teacher—while in interactions between schoolchildren, they were routinely accomplished as competent people” (2003:49). Further, while differentiating between students (through assessment) is a central task of schooling—which, countless studies show, indexes social difference as much as any abstract “achievement” (Lave and McDermott 2002)—the categories used to label students are articulated in terms (“normal,” “needs improvement”) of a developmental paradigm that is keyed to age-based assumptions about normative childhoods, and that produce children as “precompetent” (rather than incompetent or competent). That discourses of childhood in such cases provide rhetorical cover for judgments about social difference only increases the need to recognize the ideological power of “childhood” as a category in structuring schooling.

So despite the instrumental orientation of IRE and other classroom frameworks toward interchangeable and abstracted bureaucratic subjects, classrooms necessarily inscribe an original and constitutive distinction between children and adults. Building on the model of opposition and differentiation of Foley and others, we might see the production of children as
the first task of education, which accommodates further stratifications: as IRE and similar procedures attempt to flatten children’s differences, individual children begin to differentiate themselves by how they respond to the ideological weight of that framework, which over the course of schooling yields the increasingly stratified hierarchies of child and youth social groups in school. In these studies, teachers stand in simply for the bureaucratic, bourgeois orientation with whom conformist students identify. But when Eckert and McConnell-Ginet point out that burnouts see participation in extracurricular activities as “infantilizing,” the criticism is not so much that jocks and other participants are too much like bourgeois teachers, but that they subjugate themselves to teachers: by taking a solicitous stance toward teachers’ power they articulate themselves as childishly precompetent. The instrumental mode that is being responded to by the oppositionalities of the various stigmatized classes that Willis, Foley, Eckert, and others identify, has at its core an ideological claim about children and childhood (Austin, Dwyer, and Freebody 2003).

I should note that Willis, Foley, and Eckert all deal with high-school students, many of them (in the case of Willis’s lads) on the cusp of official “adulthood,” whereas the scholars I cite regarding classroom interactions focus on elementary and middle school children. There is a large disjuncture in the literature, where the scholars who most effectively address the broad power relations structured through schooling consider older students, and those who provide analytical insights into the discursive structure of school language and interaction examine younger students. “Childhood” as a category is incompletely applicable to teenagers, who nonetheless are marked by their status as “youth” in school, law, and politics (Grossberg 2005; Venkatesh and Kassimir 2007). That the shedding of carefully calibrated
age-based identities in favor of the slipperier age-gradations of full “adulthood” coincides broadly with completing school and entering the workforce only underscores the importance of age identities for high-school students (though changes in early adulthood may destabilize the link between leaving school and entering adulthood; see Arnett 2004; Côté and Allahar 1996). Age and precompetence continue to mark students in high school, though some students may increasingly inhabit legitimate roles as experts in elective music ensembles, vocational programs, clubs, etc.

It is unfortunate that critical scholars of schooling mostly ignore age as a parameter of difference, because it seems clear that constructions of youth, even childhood, do in fact play a powerful role in the social organization of high schools, and failing to address childhood and youth as childhood and youth has a long and problematic history in anthropology (Hirschfeld 2002). Nonetheless I find the expressive practices model of social differentiation in school to be extremely powerful, and I am persuaded that it has applications for understanding the production of childhood as a class and an identity in earlier school contexts.

Social construction of childhood, development, and pedagogy

Building on the “social constructionist” model of childhood outlined in the Introduction, we can see how notions of childhood itself are constructed through binaries of instrumentality and intimacy. Models of childhood as innocent and domestic—sheltered from the harshness of public capitalism—naturalize ideas of “innocence” and “domesticity” that are historically contingent (Calvert 1992; Cunningham 1998), stigmatizing families who are
unable to provide normative home environments and “street children” who transgress into “public” spaces preserved for other sorts of subjects (Boyden 1990; Warner 1992). This model of childhood domesticity ideologically reproduces cultural logics of intimacy and instrumentality: as Nancy Scheper-Hughes writes, “the instrumental value of children has been largely replaced by their expressive value. Children have become relatively worthless (economically) to their parents, but priceless in terms of their psychological worth” (1989:12) (though even modern childhoods should be understood as economically valuable; Folbre 2008).

Notably, the developmental psychology that Prout and James (1990) see as central to modern constructions of a biological, rather than social, childhood (see Introduction), is also the discipline at the center of educational discourse. In education, children are understood to have progressively developing cognitive capacities, and curricula and pedagogy are designed to follow and reinforce children’s “progress.” In their study of classrooms, Austin, Dwyer, and Freebody found links between developmental models and performances of childhood as “precompetent”: “not being yet competent in some way’ and ‘developing toward that competence’ are underlying premises in the logic of education generally, and many of the practices and procedures of schooling in particular” (2003:18). Further, they note the historical importance of age to classifications of students in school, pointing out that “as schools assembled children into grades by age, teaching settings, materials and assessment practices became age-tailored, and those theories of Childhood and development that drew on age as a correlate and potential explanation of ‘development and learning’ became productive instruments of policy for schooling” (2003:22). Age and precompetence are
central terms in developmental models, and it is through the ideological apparatus of schooling that such models are incorporated into students’ successful enactment of themselves as children in school, creating a feedback loop between ideology and practice:

[Developmental] propositions about children become organizing principles, systems of interpretation that overwrite other ways of considering people and interpreting their actions. They similarly provide normative specifications that serve as evaluative criteria for the behaviour of people at different points in the life cycle. To meet these norms, in our case to do well at school, students must, among other things, briskly discover what the adults’ theories of children are and how they, as teachable students, might enact important features of those theories. (2003:9)

We can see how precompetence and development are incorporated into the expressive repertoires of schooling by noting, for instance, that essayist literacy education proceeds from spelling words to building phrases to writing sentences, paragraphs, and structured papers. Similarly, music education that focuses on composing music (more common in the UK and Australia) builds from “elements” to notes, phrases, melodies, forms, and eventually “compositions” (K. Marsh 2008), while instrumental education develops elemental musical “skills” progressively toward the goal of competent recital performances. These generative pedagogical ladders are built out of adults’ structural decomposition of particular genres of textuality and music into constituent parts, placed in order of ascending complexity and mapped as natural onto children’s imputed cognitive deficiencies at any particular age—all of this despite a vast body of literature that shows that even very young schoolchildren have communicative, writing, and musical competencies that have little or no relation to the componential objects of language, writing, and music they are asked to “learn” in lessons.
Children’s culture and expressive traditions: phantasmagoria, friendship, play

Despite evolutionist attempts to universalize and dehistoricize childhood, if we take Foley’s account of classes as the “historical speech traditions of status groups,” children and childhood fit naturally. Children have historical expressive traditions, characterized by specific, familiar master tropes. Children’s internal relationships with one another are constructed through particular forms of social affinity—“friendship” and “peer culture”—that differentiate their communities from adults. And children’s activities are framed in terms of “play” and “fun” as unimportant and clearly distinct from adult “work.” In what follows I consider in detail children’s expressive traditions, the characteristic tropes of those traditions, children’s social relationships, and their activities. I then analyze these in terms of “intimacy” and “instrumentality” to argue for understanding childhood as constructed in schools using the terms laid out in the first sections of this chapter.

Traditions

In most places children have their own expressive traditions separate from adults; these are just ignored, for the most part, by adults and researchers (e.g., Blacking 1967; Gaunt 2006; Opie and Opie 1960; Sutton-Smith 1959). Iona and Peter Opie’s study of children’s playground games and songs is a classic example:

The school rhyme circulates from child to child, usually outside the home, and beyond the influence of the family circle . . . The schoolchild’s verses are not intended for adult ears. In fact part of their fun is the thought, usually correct, that adults know nothing about them. Grownups have outgrown the schoolchild’s lore. If made aware of it they tend to deride it; and they actively seek to suppress its livelier manifestations. Certainly they do nothing to encourage it . . . [Children have] a thriving unselfconscious culture . . . which is as unnoticed by the sophisticated [sic] world, and quite as little affected by it . . . [Children] are respecters, even venerationists, of custom; and in their self-contained
community their basic lore and language seems scarcely to alter from generation to
generation. (Opie and Opie 1960:1)

Literacy educators have begun to take seriously children’s expressive cultures outside of
the classroom, where, upon investigation, children are found to use writing and language in
ways that are systematically, structurally, and persistently opposed to the instrumental and
objectifying textual and expressive practices of the classroom (Dyson 2001, 2003; Grugeon
communicate with one another, but their passed notes and scrawlings on desks do not
conform to essayist norms (Hubbard 1989; Everhart 1983). The form and content of
children’s sophisticated and artful language is situated in separate spheres from adults
(Bauman 1977, 1982; Sanches and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1976). And children have folkloric
and ideological traditions such as “cootie lore”—globally distributed but locally articulated
practices through which children manage social difference and stigma in ways that “function
much like race and caste” (Hirschfeld 2002:619). Just as Eckert sees high school students
delineating their social affiliations through geographical claims to school spaces (1989), for
children school is spatially realized in terms of a binary in which the playground is a central
site of intimate expressivity and opposition to school’s regulation and instrumentalization of
sound, noise, and movement (Beresin 1993, 2004; Blatchford et al. 2002; Campbell 1998;

Moreover, children’s expressive practices for the most part ignore school’s separation of
communication into distinct media, as they combine touch and gesture with writing, speech,
and music. Their musical practices notably integrate rhythmic syncopations with language
play, movement, and especially touch. Despite a constant effort by music educators to teach
music in blocks of ascending structure, children’s musical cultures are much richer, more varied, and complex (Campbell 1998), children’s musical play in peer groups is structurally much more complicated (K. Marsh 1995), and their procedures for teaching one another new songs and games much more integrated and holistic than educators’ componential progressions (K. Marsh 1997, 2002). Further, the children’s texts that the Opies collected across the United Kingdom were most likely sung, danced, and clapped (Opie 1994; Opie and Opie 1960, 1979, 1985), and such playground songs and games increasingly represent a global repertoire that circulates through migration and media, embedded in locally specific expressive traditions—often so localized as to vary remarkably between schools in the same community (K. Marsh 2008).14

Master tropes (phantasmagoria)

Also important to children’s expressive traditions is what Brian Sutton-Smith terms “phantasmagoria”: the fantastic, violent, sexual, gory, painful, punning, cruel, and gross elements of children’s culture: “riddle parodies, bathroom jokes, cruel jokes, gross jokes, elephant jokes, Dolly Parton jokes, Christa McAuliffe jokes, and stories that center on absurdity” (Sutton-Smith 1997:165; also Sutton-Smith and Abrams 1978)15 and what McGillis calls “coprophilia,” or the “culture of grossness” (2003). Sutton-Smith positions

14 Children’s folkloric traditions can and have been used to position them as “primitive” and their expressivity as “authentic” or close to nature—i.e., as evidence for evolutionist, developmental views (Minks 2002; K. Marsh 2008). While this is often still an inclination we should reject those frameworks for children’s folklore in the same way and for the same reasons we reject them for any other folklore traditions (Bauman 1982).

15 McAuliffe was the schoolteacher who died when the space shuttle Challenger exploded during take-off in 1986.
phantasmagoria in specifically literary terms, along an axis of access to rationality and irrationality that structures the politics of children and adults:

If you add to young children’s story disasters their repetitive episodic plots, their preferences for rhyme and alliteration, their nonsense, their obscenity, their crazy titles, morals, and characters, it is not surprising that most adults, even those who believe they are favorable to creative expression, tend to avoid them. Our Western belief in rationality is so important to us that tolerance for such clear bouts of apparent irrationality is limited, even though one could point out that in these cases the irrationality is only of a literary kind, not a behavioral one. (1997:161)

Phantasmagoria may not necessarily be particular to childhood, as we can see its characteristic grossness, absurdity, cruelty, and sexuality in adult expressive traditions (often in discourse that is keyed as masculine). Linking fantasy, sex, cruelty, defecation, and silliness as shared elements of a single discourse connects the various “absurd” elements of children’s culture to broader (adult) discourses of transgression: grotesque, contaminated, carnal, and carnivalesque (Stallybrass and White 1986). The inversions, oppositions, and deconstructions of transgression take on a particular character in children’s culture, which poses phantasmagoria as a master trope in the relation between childhood and adults:

It seems that the history of the imagination in childhood is a history of ever greater suppression and rationalization of the irrational. Paradoxically children, who are supposed to be the players among us, are allowed much less freedom for irrational, wild, dark, or deep play in Western culture than are adults, who are thought not to play at all. Studies of child fantasy are largely about the control, domestication, and direction of childhood. So in a sense the rhetoric of the imaginary, with its emphasis on so many varied possible rational and irrational play transformations, is not much used for childhood. (Sutton-Smith 1997:151–52)

Ito suggests that Sutton-Smith’s analysis of adult “repression” of phantasmagoria makes better sense in Foucauldian terms: “we could consider adult efforts to manage children’s play as less a ‘repressive’ regime that silences these dark fantasies, than an ‘incitement to discourse’ that gives voice and form to ‘unnatural’ and regressive play in opposition to
‘natural,’ wholesome, and productive play” (2002:174). Thus children’s phantasmagoria is not an inherent or unique characteristic of their expressive traditions. Rather it is a product of adults’ ideological attempts to order childhood, such that literary tropes of phantasmagoria are projected onto Western epistemologies of irrationality and rationality which are themselves mapped, as a parameter of intimacy and instrumentality, onto the hegemonic relationship between children and adults.

**Social relationships (friends and peers)**

Childhood also claims its own forms of social relationships. “Friendship,” in particular, is constitutive of children’s social identities in a way that does not seem to apply to adults. Friendships problematize neoliberal models of individualization and governmentality by foregrounding the intimacy of relationships, and the production of instrumental subjectivities takes place in the intensity and intimacy of friendship relationships (Hey 2002; McLeod 2002). Children construct racial, ethnic, and (especially) gendered identities in terms of the particular social logic of friendships (Allard 2002; Kehily et al. 2002; McLeod 2002; Redman et al. 2002), such that “young people [are] engaged in negotiating the entanglements of class, ‘race,’ and gender as complex sociobiographical practices that center the moral, social, and discursive presentation of the self. Cast in this light, questions of morality and identity are recast by young people in the register of the etiquette of friendship as questions of taste and trust that situate their core concerns” (Hey 2002:231).

Outside the particular intimacies of “friendship,” children’s relationships with one another are commonly framed as “peer relationships”—a term that expresses horizontal
affiliation and joint membership in a particular category (Ladd 1999). But though the term comes naturally when discussing childhood, in other (adult) contexts “peer” is a marked term, used in specific legal or ceremonial contexts to emphasize equality and reciprocity, but rarely in everyday discourse. The ubiquitous application of “peer” to children in relationships with one another reflects a discourse that positions and separates children as a marginal class, where by highlighting the relative equality of children the term itself exposes the ubiquitous and default fact of inequality and hierarchy in relations between children and adults. Despite the term’s ideological valence, an empirical focus on “peer cultures” consistently reveals that children do produce and maintain independent social environments with their own consistent rules and expectations (Adler and Adler 1998; Chen, French, and Schneider 2006; Corsaro 1985; Corsaro and Eder 1990). Further, “peer cultural” environments in which children turn inward, away from adults and toward one another, are prominent locations for the “interpretive reproduction” of practices from dominant adult cultures (Corsaro 1992)—a model that reflects Willis’s focus on adolescent peer relationships as the site of reproduction of class cultures:

The production of peer culture is neither a matter of simple imitation nor a direct appropriation of the adult world. Children creatively appropriate information from the adult world to produce their own unique peer cultures. Such appropriation is creative in that it extends or elaborates peer culture (transforms information from the adult world to meet the concerns of the peer world) and simultaneously contributes to the reproduction of the adult culture. Thus, children’s peer cultures have an autonomy and an irreducibility . . . that make them worthy of documentation in their own right. (Corsaro 1992:168)

While friendship and peer relationships are often understood by adults as necessary and natural activities in children’s development, it may make more sense to see these forms of affinity simply as outcomes of the persistent spatial and social separation of children from
adults, and age gradations among children, in the institutions where children spend their
days. That is, “peer culture” depends on the particular stratifications of children and adults
that are accomplished in schools. Segmented and bounded, children develop relationships
that necessarily reflect and incorporate members’ shared status as “peers” in a marginalized
group. This marginal status is then taken up by children (in a familiar move of identity
politics) as a site of tactical, local empowerment, as children actively intensify their
separation from adults to claim increasing spaces of freedom. As James writes, “the true
nature of the culture of childhood frequently remains hidden from adults, for the semantic
cues which permit social recognition have been manipulated and disguised by children in
terms of their alternative society . . . By confusing the adult order children create for
themselves considerable room for movement within the limits imposed upon them by adult

Characteristic practices (play and fun)

Childhood claims “play” and “fun” as characteristic practices (Sutton-Smith 1997), in
obvious contrast to adult “work.” Play and fun map onto phantasmagoria and irrationality,
and play is seen to be a characteristic activity of “peer cultures.” Play is what children do
together. But play itself is often subdivided. Adults certainly play, but play activities like
sports are often so highly structured as to resemble work. Adults and educators often see
children’s play as simply the disguised work of development: children “play at” adult roles
that they will one day inhabit. Educators distinguish between directed and undirected play,
and play that results in development versus play that is simply irrational or “fun”—and this
subdivision of children’s play maps further onto class categories, articulating rational play as bourgeois and irrational play as “poor” (Sutton-Smith 1982). Like phantasmagoria, play is not the unique province of children, but the association of play to childhood again maps an ideological binary (play/work) onto a division of society (children/adults).

**Childhood takes intimacy as its organizing principle; childhood looks a lot like class**

Playground expressive traditions are characteristically intimate in their attention to sociability and participation, and their groundedness in physical and temporal presence. The language of passed notes is full of pronouns and references to proximate times and places (e.g., “isn’t this stupid?” “what are you doing at recess,” “want to hold hands on the bus?”), involving a medium whose physicality is carefully attended to in repeated folds of paper, and whose actual transmission involves constant vigilance about the communication’s participants (i.e., whether the teacher is looking on). Scribbling a message on a desk anticipates a friend’s future body, unlike the essayist literacy that progressively trains writers to address no specific audience at all. Similarly music education focuses on the textual elements of music, emphasizing children’s individual production of textual “compositions,” but children’s musical play is characteristically participatory—to the extent that their hand-clapping games prominently depend on complex coordination of gesture and touch with complicated wordplay and syncopated rhythms. Children produce new musical texts and genres not through individual “composition” but through co-construction of new forms in group performances (K. Marsh 2008). Children’s active appeal to phantasmagoria rejects the “rational” logics imposed on them by adults in favor of intentionally absurd and irrational
expressivity that intimately links them as an interpretive community, further positioning their expressive practices in structural opposition to adult regimes of education and childcare. And friendship and peer culture situate children within a qualitatively particular structure of social relationships, in which “young people’s investments in the practice of compulsory sociability is so strong that no amount of neoliberalism is ever likely to overwrite it” (Hey 2002:239).

When Poole points to students initiating orientations toward one another, we can see them as proposing an intimate framework to replace the dominant IRE, or layering intimate stances within instrumental classroom interactions. When, as Austin, Dwyer, and Freebody point out that students in a class perform themselves as a cohort, a group of children corporately responsive to the teacher, on the one hand they accommodate the IRE participation framework that is oriented toward them as precompetent children, but at the same time they produce the conditions for orienting to one another as peers, friends, and intimates in spaces carved out away from adult oversight. And as I discuss in the following chapter, Rymes (2003) points out that—just as Eckert’s burnouts orient not just to one another, but to their wider community outside of school—in student-initiated interactions in literacy events like those described by Poole, children’s indexicality often produces orientations toward much wider contexts in the community, in media, and even politicized categories of race and sexuality, all of which teachers’ decontextualized stance explicitly rejects as inappropriate.

So children organize themselves into frequently oppositional sub- (peer) cultures with their own expressive traditions that are separate from the expressive expectations of adults, against which they are often explicitly contrasted along an axis of intimacy and
instrumentality. Childhood, in this sense, fits nicely within a rubric that understands class cultures as “the historical speech traditions of status groups” (Foley 1990:181) or as communities of practice constructed through everyday expressive acts that index and produce group affiliations (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995). In response to Foley’s suggestion that the specifically intimate character of anti-instrumental expressive cultures has its roots in traditional communities, we might note that the domestic spaces of home and family and the semi-public sites of children’s peer culture involve more contextual and indexical interactions than truly bureaucratic contexts such as workplaces and classrooms. What’s more, while the construction of an intimate sphere in contrast to the public sphere has been examined for producing femininity as domestic and private (Fraser 1985), the concomitant construction of innocent, vulnerable, and economically unproductive children is certainly a necessary correlate to that critique.

Childhood, when accounting for its social constitution, the powerful ideologies that make claims on it, its weak structural position in bureaucratic institutions, and the historical expressive traditions of children around the world, is necessarily seen as a social category produced in and through the expressive competitions of school. To make this claim is definitely not to portray the working-class or Hispanic communities that Willis and Foley discuss as juvenile or childish through a comparison with children and childhood. (But it again reveals childhood as a stigmatized category when we note how even association with children has the potential to be deeply insulting; the repeated colonial impulse (for instance) to classify non-white people as “childish” has as much to tell us about constructions of childhood as it does about racism and colonialism (Stephens 1995).) Instead it is necessary to
open the constructionist locker to admit age as a category of identity, and to begin to unpack how age articulates with race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and various other terms in a constellation of signification about the status of individuals and groups. Just as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet point out that certain speech markers correlate simultaneously with class and gender, ultimately positioning working-class girls as especially marked, we can see, for instance, immigrant children multiply stigmatized by their language, ethnicity, and age when they are forced to interact with English-speaking bureaucracies on behalf of non-English speaking parents (Reynolds and Orellana 2009).

As James Collins points out, there are persistent difficulties in analyses that implicate schools as centrally responsible for the reproduction of social inequalities along lines of gender, class, and race (2009). In particular, it is apparent that many other influences in addition to schooling participate in the reproduction of social difference. Collins suggests greater attention to the “interplay of classrooms, schools, and the wider society” (2009:44). This is welcome but, I would argue, insufficient. As I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter, the identities that schools are continually producing prominently include those of “child” and “adult.” Approaches that seek to identify social stratifications in the adult world through reference to those adults’ previous experience as schoolchildren have already subordinated children and childhood to an analytically secondary role, and thus value actual children’s experiences only insofar as they produce adult subjectivities (reinscribing, once again, the same old view of childhood as transient and children as the “future,” rather than a huge segment of the actually existing population; J. Cole and Durham 2008a). Without question, distinctions of gender, class, and race, among others, have powerful social effects
even very early in individuals’ lives, but questions about social reproduction and schooling may not be answerable until we understand the initial “production” of children qua children in school, through the constant regulation of distinctions between children and adults and among gradations of age and “development.” Thus, fully understanding “how working class kids get working class jobs” (Willis [1977] 1981) might require asking how working class kids become working class kids in the first place. I think it is clear that the expressive practices approach developed in the work of Willis, Foley, and Eckert has unmistakable analytical force in understanding the institutional organization of schools, but the difficulties of diachronic studies pointed out by Collins will remain so long as synchronic approaches to the social organization of schooling neglect children and childhood.

My goal in the remainder of this dissertation is to point to the connections between entertainment media, especially music, and the “intimate” modalities that structure children’s position as children in school. To accomplish this, I look more to the social and interactional modes of music and media consumption than to an analysis of media texts themselves.
Chapter 2

Children’s Music, “Tweens,” and Identity (Politics)

In this chapter, I explore how the same intimacies that position children in opposition to school produce affiliations with entertainment and media industries through the cultural logic of consumption. I note in particular that the common theme of discourses around children’s entertainment and consumption is “(dis)empowerment” (Cook 2007)—where anxious and celebratory discourses about child consumption of media and goods construct child audiences as ambiguous and contradictory. Unlike in school, where children are continually reminded of their subordinate roles and marginal institutional status, children are an increasingly powerful presence in entertainment media and consumer culture, as the last decade has seen the dramatic expansion of the children’s media, entertainment, and consumer market.

The expansion of the children’s entertainment industry has powerful consequences for how childhood is understood by children and adults. For instance, marketers and media professionals tend to understand the growth of the children’s consumer market as involving “children growing older younger” (Montgomery 2007:20). Thus, Juliet Schor quotes Betsy Frank of MTV Networks that, “If something works for MTV, it will also work for Nickelodeon” (2004:20), citing that company’s two cable channels, one directed toward teenagers and young adults, the other toward young teenagers and children. By this view, the
age-gradations of children’s content are continually inflating, such that younger children are presented with more mature material, whittling away at the “childishness” of childhood.

Such a view assumes that the direction of influence is always downward, from older to younger. It also carries an implicit suggestion that as children participate more and more in consumer practices, by necessity their activities will be more and more mature; the public spaces of consumption are not supposed to be compatible with children and childhood, so child consumers adapt to more mature content. But the reverse logic may also be at work: as children’s entertainment gains a wider foothold, so do the characteristics of children’s culture filter even more broadly into mainstream popular and consumer culture. Rather than children adapting to a mature public sphere of consumption, the consumer world adapts itself to the increasing presence of children. In perhaps the most vociferous statement of this alternate thesis, Benjamin Barber argues that, in fact, consumer culture aggressively tends toward “infantilization,” which “aims at inducing puerility in adults and preserving what is childish in children trying to grow up, even as children are ‘empowered’ to consume” (2007:82).16

The priority placed on “cuteness” in Japanese popular culture might be an example of

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16 Though I lean on Barber’s argument here and elsewhere, I think it is necessary to push back against this sense of the term “infantilization.” A writer such as Barber would never use “feminization” with such a pervasively negative valence, and his use of “infantilize” suggests a profound ignorance of the actual cultures and traditions of children around the world, who certainly do not deserve the scorn implicit in this term (and in Barber’s frequently used synonyms, “puerile” and “childish”). I note again Adora Svitak’s comment that “the traits the word ‘childish’ addresses are seen so often in adults that we should abolish this age-discriminatory word when it comes to criticizing behavior associated with irresponsibility and irrational thinking” (2010). Barber cannot (and does not) claim that the practices he describes are somehow essential to children as such, so his almost gleeful refrain—infantilization! puerility! childishness!—serves only to play off of readers’ worst prejudices. This seems part of a broader problem, where Barber’s overall argument is relatively careful, but its packaging is unapologetically sensationalist. The book’s title, for instance, is spelled “Con$umed,” and the subtitle is no less restrained: “How markets corrupt children, infantilize adults, and swallow citizens whole.” Provocative terms like “kidult” occur prominently in chapter titles (and then disappear from the actual discussion). Ironically, noting the book’s thesis about consumerism “corrupting” reasoned, mature, adult activities, it certainly seems dressed up to sell as many copies as possible to an excitable audience.
Barber’s thesis, and this cuteness filters into the global imagination through brands like Pokémon and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* that are marketed through video games, television shows, websites, toys, and trading cards (Allison 2004, 2006; Ito 2007). Buckingham and Sefton-Green propose that the global success of Pokémon is part of a trend that positions “children’s culture in the forefront of developments in global capitalism” (2003:396), especially through (childish) emphasis on activity and social interaction. Similarly, we might extrapolate from Kathryn Montgomery’s history of policy controversies around children and the Internet in the U.S. that one characteristic feature of “new media” is, in fact, childishness (2007): the “Web 2.0” innovations that pushed the Internet towards increasing interactivity and connectivity originated in attempts by marketers to adapt digital media to what they saw as the cultural norms of childhood (the same sociality, immersion, and interactivity that make Pokémon both so childish and so widely successful). Innovative websites specifically sought out children online with interactive games, social networking, and instant messaging services, as well as viral marketing and cross-media brand promotions, which provided rich sources of sensitive marketing data and direct connections to kids’ intimate social and personal lives (see also eMarketer 2010). That these configurations of the Internet have since expanded into ubiquitous adult use of sites like Facebook further suggests that social practices that originate among children are increasingly central to the consumer culture of the new media environment.

At the forefront of these developments, popular music recordings for children have emerged as a major area of growth in an otherwise struggling music industry, whose dramatic success in the last decade has forced a public reckoning between child artists and
“mainstream” adult celebrities as the boundaries that once separated them have begun to close. One week early in 2006, the three top-selling records on the Billboard sales charts were children’s albums (Levine 2006). Brands like Kidz Bop market “mainstream” Top 40 music to children, slightly repackaged to moderate any adult concerns that such music might be too “mature” for audiences as young as four years old. And in the reverse dynamic, professionally produced and carefully managed music acts such as Miley Cyrus, the Jonas Brothers, and Justin Bieber have brought music directly produced for children to mainstream prominence. The increasing dominance of entertainment for children, with music at its forefront, points to cultural and political changes with implications beyond simply commercial success. The exploding circulation of entertainment media for children has led to predictable collisions between prominent children’s entertainment and mainstream adult media, and this conflict is articulated through expressions of solidarity and group identity as children. Employing confrontational tropes of identity politics, children’s entertainment increasingly seems to enact what is what is lately referred to as a “counterpublic” (Warner 2002).

In this chapter I explore the tensions around children’s participation and prominence in the media and public consumer culture more broadly. I begin with the cable television channel Nickelodeon and the emergence of the term “tween” to outline children’s problematic presence in public consumer culture, before I examine musical offerings from Kidz Bop and Disney. I then point out prominent collisions onstage at MTV’s Video Music Awards between public figures representing children’s entertainment, on the one hand, and mainstream adult media, on the other, and I theorize these occurrences as performances of
childhood as an emerging counterpublic. Finally I return to the questions raised in the preceding chapter about the expressive construction of difference in schools to understand how media constructions of childhood publics can help make sense of peer cultural solidarity among schoolchildren.

**Kids Rule! or, children and media industries unite**

While schools construct childhood particularly through authority and separation from adulthood, since the 1980s entertainment media has portrayed the separation from mainstream adult culture not as marginality but as freedom. In this section I explore the tropes of that construction, noting especially how phantasmagorical imagery and intimate interactivity—seen in the previous chapter as historically characteristic of children’s expressive traditions—have become central to children’s media and consumer culture. This “empowerment” of children as consumers depends on the same dialectics of childhood intimacy and instrumentality, so entertainment media construct childhood in essentially the same terms as schooling—by carefully negotiating concerns over risk and vulnerability, through age-grading of content, and through explicit moves to frame entertainment materials as “childish.” Ito writes that, “far from being an unmediated voice of a natural childhood pleasure principle, phantasmagoria and spectacle are distributed, engineered social productions that unite children and media industries” (2005b:100) in solidarity with one another and in vague opposition to various adults—parents and teachers who police purchasing and consumption, and even adult media figures, who criticize, mock, and dismiss kids’ media, until those kids and their media become too powerful to ignore.
The children’s media industry grew rapidly during the 1980s and 1990s (Pecora 1998; Montgomery 2007; Mitroff and Herr-Stephenson 2007). The prominent success story during this period was Nickelodeon, a cable network introduced in 1979 to cater specifically to children. On cable Nickelodeon was relatively free from homogenizing market demands and government regulations that constrained network television programming for children (Banet-Weiser 2007:17; Pecora 2004). Without the legal compulsion to meet quotas of “educational” programming, Nickelodeon innovatively engaged its young audience with a mantra that said, “let kids be kids” (McDonough 2004). This appeal to the idea that there is something uniquely characteristic of “being a kid” represented the culmination of a history in which marketers of clothing and other consumer products for children only gradually transitioned from targeting parents—specifically mothers—as the audience for advertising, eventually appealing directly to children (Cook 2004b). This “discovery” of kids as discerning viewers coincided with the rapid expansion of kids’ purchasing power: children directly spend tens of billions of dollars annually, and influence as much as $200 billion in family spending.

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17 Pecora writes that, “without cable there would be no Nickelodeon” (2004:17).
18 I hesitate to lead with specific numbers because what information is available is inconsistent and comes from market researchers with an interest in hyping the data. Most academic sources (such as Zelizer 2002; Schor 2004, 2006; Montgomery 2000, 2007; and Rose, Boush, and Shoham 2002) cite numbers from “marketing guru” (and retired Texas A&M professor) James McNeal, who estimated a decade ago that U.S. children age 4–12 directly spend more than $20 billion annually, and influence another $188 billion in family spending (1999). Those numbers have almost certainly grown. A more recent report by MarketResearch.com using fall 2007 data (which coincides with the beginning of my research and the release of several major Disney pop albums) claims that kids 3–11 had “income” of $19 billion (R. Brown and Washton 2008), and an earlier report claimed that kids 8–14 (which tracks more closely with my research subjects), have direct buying power closer to $40 billion (R. Brown and Washton 2005). Using data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, MarketResearch.com calculates that families spend another $123 billion on consumer items for kids 3–11 (R. Brown and Washton 2008). That number includes $42 billion on “personal care items, entertainment, and reading materials,” or the “miscellaneous” category of the 2007 USDA report (Lino 2008), which is based on data from 1990–92. The 2008 report, based on data from 2005–6, suggests a slight decrease in overall per-family spending on this
Letting “kids be kids” involved adopting the characteristic phantasmagoria of children’s expressive culture, such that brightly colored slime, a signature prop from early in the station’s history, became iconic of the Nickelodeon brand. Beyond the obvious coprophilia of slime, Banet-Weiser argues that animated shows like *The Ren & Stimpy Show* and *Spongebob Squarepants* framed grossness and absurdity as campy and ironic to “harness a political ideology—gay identity politics, queer theory—and commodify it as an aesthetic practice” (2007:37), thus articulating childhood phantasmagoria as resistant and oppositional through links to identity politics and an economy of irreverent “cool” (2007:180). Constructing children as separate—using specific tropological materials that clearly distinguished and opposed children’s entertainment from mainstream of adult entertainment—went hand in hand with an appeal to children’s empowerment, so the accompanying slogan was “kids rule!” (Banet-Weiser 2007), and Nickelodeon programming also drew on feminist and multicultural discourses to produce children as a particular empowered and oppositional audience (Banet-Weiser 2004; Hains 2007; Schor 2004:52–53). These elements constructed childhood as separate in part through an appeal to themes (irony, camp, cool, feminism, multiculturalism) from mainstream and adult culture that attracted an adult audience:

The divisive strategy employed by Nickelodeon that establishes a discrete boundary between adults and children is one that functions brilliantly for the company in terms of profit . . . The exaggerated generational conflict that Nickelodeon cultivates and

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category (Lino and Carlson 2009). I do not know how that affects the aggregate numbers, or what the breakdown would be for media spending in particular. The MarketResearch.com/USDA data measures direct spending, whereas McNeal’s decade-old numbers estimates kids’ “influence” on family spending, which may include substantial expenditures on cars and vacations. (MarketResearch.com sells proprietary reports for premium rates; those cited here are priced at thousands of dollars. I accessed these at the Science, Industry, and Business Library of the New York Public Library, which is open to the public. In the interest of scholarly access, I hesitate to cite proprietary reports, but to my knowledge academic data is not otherwise available.)
markets as a kind of fun rebellion actually results in a blurring of the two identity categories [by attracting adult viewers]. Thus Nickelodeon presents a “convergence of generations” where adults are addressed as children on television, and children are encouraged to act like adults. (2007:5)

If Nickelodeon’s audience and content at times blurred the lines between actual adults and children, this process did not ultimately destabilize the constitutive binary between adults and children. Cross-over shows, as it were, required a stable boundary to cross over: “according to the Nickelodeon logic, if adults are sometimes not stuffy, just as children are sometimes not innocent and naïve, it proves (or disproves) nothing about the ‘essential nature’ of adulthood or childhood: it proves only that adults and kids can play at being each other” (Hendershot 2004:184).

Ito points out that this opposition between child and adult has emerged as constitutive of the broader children’s entertainment industries: “Media industries have found a new market in both kids and adults who are attracted to a certain depiction of childhood, one that is distinguished from and resistant to certain structures of adult society without being depicted as inferior. Symbolized by . . . triumphs over corrupt adult society, childhood play is represented as mobilizing the power of the margin” (2007:105). The tropology of this oppositional children’s media culture specifically involves phantasmagoria—a historical marker of children’s distinct expressive community:

Entertainment industries participate in the production of institutionalized genres that are packaged and stereotyped into certain formulas that kids recognize and identify with as a liberatory and authentic kids’ culture . . . These appear as gross bodily noises, explosions, hyperbole, and increasingly, established licensed characters. This “junk culture” is a particular vernacular that cross-cuts media and commodity types, making its way into snack foods, television, movies, school supplies, and interactive multimedia [as] a site of opposition between adults and kids. (Ito 2005b:101)
**Be-“tween” childhood and adolescence**

The contradictory logic of simultaneous separation and inclusion works in part because the ideological construction of childhood itself depends on many generic markers of difference. If, as Ito writes, childhood play mobilizes the power of the margin, the marginal position is constructed negatively, in opposition to power and instrumentality, rather than positively through reference to tropes of childhood (partly because, as I outline above, tropes of childhood are not necessarily unique to children). A progressive legitimation of children as consumers is necessarily contradictory, because children are (always) already constructed as private, domestic subjects, excluded from participation in (and risk from) public commerce (Stephens 1995). Therefore the terms of children’s consumption are full of tension and contradiction.

The term that encompasses these tensions and contradictions is “tween.” In parallel with the rise of Nickelodeon and the expansion of children’s media, the category tween emerged and consolidated a demographic and cultural designation for young people “between” childhood and adolescence—nine- to twelve-year-old kids (narrowly, or broadly four- to fifteen-years-old) who might otherwise be called pre-adolescents. The cutesy play on “teen” and “between” reflects the significant insight that tweens embody the contradictions of separation and inclusion seen in media channels like Nickelodeon: simultaneously innocent children and sophisticated consumers. Ambiguity, Cook and Kaiser argue (2004), is the most characteristic element of the tween clothing industry. This involves not so much under- as over-specification of multiple and apparently contradictory markers age and status, so that tween products, especially media, are simultaneously anticipatory and constraining.
A central issue in the ambiguous construction of tweens is anxiety over children’s (especially girls’) sexuality: “Common to the cultural discourse surrounding the ‘tween’ and its preceding categories is the expression of public anxieties about female sexual behavior and mode of self-presentation” (2004:204). Sexuality is, of course, seen as a trait of adults that is categorically unavailable to children (Egan and Hawkes 2010). On the other hand, sexuality is central to media and advertising, and Cook and Kaiser note an “inextricable link between the age category of ‘tween-ness’ and the marketplace” (2004:204). When “children” exhibit sexual desires or perform sexualized scripts, they destabilize powerful social and moral assumptions, and so tween identities “represent a coupling of everyday anxieties and pleasures with cultural discourses that blur age boundaries while also (strategically and commercially) aiming to define them” (2004:223).

These contradictions foreground tweens’ peripherality from adult popular culture while developing settings for children to legitimately enact adult habits of performance and consumption. Just as Nickelodeon’s blurring of categories ultimately serves to reinforce them, Cook and Kaiser write about marketing literature around tweens that emphasizes separation and inclusion simultaneously: “despite the ever-blurring boundaries between a separate Tween-ness and young womanhood, industry discourse continues—indeed, intensifies—its goal of constituting a distinct cultural commercial space for Tweens” (2004:222). This construction of “tween” simply focuses an existing logic of childhood, a category that embodies an ideological opposition between local domesticity and public commerce, but remains understood as a privileged site as yet unalienated by capitalism (Stephens 1995). Thus the commercial construction of tweens appeals to the ideological
marginalization of childhood as innocent, vulnerable, and domestic precisely to legitimate and soften children’s visible presence in public commerce, thus reinforcing the ideological divisions of public and private, adult and child, commercial and cultural, while delicately penetrating their boundaries.

While the category tween began as a further segmentation of the children’s market into finer and finer age-graded categories, it has since expanded. Material marketed to tweens has persistently crept outward from a pre-adolescent center, expanding to include true “children” as well as teenagers. That is, tween has become the hegemonic frame of children’s media, precisely because it explicitly embodies the contradictions of private subjects in public participation that are implicit in childhood and adolescence. In music, at one time children could clearly be seen to move through age-graded “tastes”—from liking classical music and kiddie music to liking pop generically to settling into preferences for specific genres of popular music (Feilitzen and Roe 1990)—but now brands like Kidz Bop and Disney bring mainstream music to children as young as four and as old as fifteen (or even older), and bring “children’s” music to dominance in the mainstream market.19

19 Compare the expansion and overlap of age categories in music with a similar phenomenon among various Pokémon products: “particular Pokémon products have been created to fit in with the toys or media genres most characteristic of particular (overlapping) age groups: soft toys for the under-fives, TV cartoons for the four- to nine-year-olds, trading cards for the six- to ten- year-olds, computer games for the seven- to twelve-year-olds, and so on. Interestingly, these overlaps and the connections that cut across the range of products available allow for ‘aspirational’ consumption, but also for a kind of ‘regression’—by which it becomes almost permissible, for instance, for a seven-year-old to possess a Pokémon soft toy, or a twelve- year-old to watch a TV cartoon” (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2003).
Making pop music childish: Kidz Bop

While television stations like Nickelodeon have achieved success cultivating the niche kids’ market, in the last several years pop music made for kids has taken a step further, and broken through to broader commercial dominance. The top-selling album of 2006, for instance, was the soundtrack to the massively popular Disney Channel movie *High School Musical*, and the tween market is a rare area of dramatic growth in an otherwise struggling music industry. The economic success of music for kids is accompanied by a blurring of the lines between “mainstream” and childish music. The brand Kidz Bop is a prominent example. Kidz Bop sells CD compilations of top-forty hits for preteens, rerecorded with groups of children singing along to the choruses and hooks, occasionally interjecting “yeah!” and “wooh!”, and markets itself as the “most popular and most recognized music product in the U.S. for kids aged 4–11” (Razor and Tie Media 2010). The top-selling children’s brand in the four years through 2006, Kidz Bop set the stage for the explosion in 2006 and 2007 of tween acts, especially those from Disney, including *High School Musical*, Hannah Montana, and the Jonas Brothers (discussed in the following section). Kidz Bop became a major market force in its own right, when in 2005 and 2006 its albums cracked the top ten in the all-around Billboard album sales charts, reaching the second and third best-selling albums in the country.

Kidz Bop presents itself as “kid friendly music,” filling a niche for children who are exposed to hit songs at school, on the radio, on television, or through the Internet, but whose parents are uncomfortable purchasing music for their children that includes heightened language or sexuality. A suggestion of danger in popular culture helps Kidz Bop market its
brand. One executive states that Kidz Bop “allows kids to key into more cultural, popular things, but also have it be safe for [kids], and for parents to be comfortable that it’s not as dangerous as everything that’s on the radio” (S. L. McCarthy 2006). Kidz Bop label Razor & Tie describes its target age group as “kids who have outgrown Elmo but are not quite ready for Eminem” (Pang 2006), citing the rapper Eminem as a widely recognized figure in recent moral panics about popular music’s influence on children.

Rhetorics of “safety” are key to entertainment for “tweens,” where the apparent contradiction between protected childhoods and popular participation are in fact central to the construction of kids as active and engaged consumers. Kidz Bop’s intervention in making popular music “safe” seems to involve packaging and framing more than changing the actual content of songs. The compilations avoid altogether songs that would be unresolvably explicit. But that seems to be a small category (those songs do not often get regular Top 40 radio airplay), and with songs that are included in their compilations, only minor adjustments are made to sanitize the language. Particular words—“hell,” “retarded”—may be changed, so in the Ciara song, “1, 2 Step,” the line “So retarded, top charted, ever since the day I started” is rewritten (insensibly) as “credit-carded, top charted . . .” But the sexually suggestive line that follows, “Strut my stuff and yes I flaunt it, goodies make the boys jump on it,” is included in the Kidz Bop version unchanged (S. Harrison 2006). Or on the recording of Modest Mouse’s “Float On,” a chorus of enthusiastic tweens sings along to lyrics that problematically limn issues of race and criminality: “I backed my car into a cop car the other day” and “a big Jamaican took every last dime with that scam.” So in general, the songs are only minimally altered for an audience of children. Instead, the legitimacy of Top 40 music
for child audiences seems to be accomplished performatively, such that the addition of amateur children’s voices to the recordings frames the link between kids and pop music as natural, a settled fact—if there are already dozens of cute and untroubled kids doing it on the recording, who are we to argue?

The imagery Kidz Bop uses to legitimates children’s participation in popular culture can be seen in the video produced for Kidz Bop’s version of Kelly Clarkson’s 2005 Grammy-winning hit, “Since U Been Gone,” on the album *Kidz Bop Volume 8* (the first Kidz Bop album to crack the Billboard Top 10), which also came out in 2005. The video outlines a trajectory of imagination, desire, and performance along a vector of media and mediation.20 It centers on a girl in her bedroom singing into a hairbrush microphone. With her younger brother’s assistance, she performs in front of a home video camera, backed by a band of stuffed animals. A portable CD player on the bed plays what is presumably the original Kelly Clarkson track, with which the sister sings along. The presence of the CD player next to the sister situates Kelly Clarkson, not Kidz Bop, as the object of musical desire, confirming what is implicit in the recordings, that Kidz Bop inscribes at its center its own secondary relation to “original,” “adult” music. As the song builds toward the chorus, the video cuts to drawings of the stuffed animal “band members” made by the younger brother. The drawings animate, and at the chorus the video cuts to a (widescreen) fantasy of the sister on stage in a dimly lit nightclub performing for a crowd of children a few years younger than she. The band of stuffed animals are now life-size costumed performers backing up the singing sister. The audience of younger children assumes the role of Kidz Bop chorus, and the sister

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20 As of March 2011, the video can be viewed at http://www.kidzbop.com/video/player/129
fantastically breaks through from play performance to the real thing, and she moves and
dances with an intricate and subtle repertoire of gendered and sexualized gestures,
expressions, and stances (see Bickford 2008 for a more detailed analysis of the video).

The fantasy nightclub of the video mixes markers of childhood and adulthood, where
phantasmagorical stuffed animals are the musicians in a (rather mature) darkened nightclub.
Juxtaposing these tropes—framing them consistently through the device of bedroom
fantasy—Kidz Bop triangulates tweens as the negative ground between “Elmo” and
“Eminem,” as simultaneously both and neither child and adult, in which children need not
distance themselves from the trappings of childhood to engage their desire for legitimate
peripheral consumption. Or, more precisely, the very presence of trappings of childhood—
here the trope of stuffed animals coming alive—transforms the darkened nightclub into a kid-
friendly place, just as the presence of kids’ voices on the recordings effectively transforms
potentially dangerous pop songs into kids’ music. In this way, Kidz Bop sells to parents and
children a setting for and a vision of children’s legitimate participation in popular culture.
This is a feat accomplished via elegant contradiction, as the Kidz Bop brand legitimates
tween consumption while simultaneously reinforcing anxieties about the effects of capitalist
culture on the privileged spaces of childhood.

The video sells more than just a justification of kids’ music listening: Around the time the
video came out, Kidz Bop was rolling out a Web 2.0 version of their website, kidzbop.com.
They refigured the site as a video and social-networking location for children (with their
parents’ permission) to upload videos of themselves singing along to favorite recordings
(thus distributing their own private performances in a public forum). The home-movie theme
of the “Since U Been Gone” video, then, was contextualized within the growing popularity of video websites like YouTube, so the change in aspect ratio that articulates a switch from home to fantasy, also suggests a shift from the mundane domesticity caught by the camera to the digitally mediated world of the video’s anticipated reception. This focus on domestic performance and media production calls to mind Mary Celeste Kearney’s emphasis on kids’ bedrooms as “productive spaces” (2007), though Kidz Bop is clearly trying to appropriate the trope of domestic production to elicit even more consumption.

That Kidz Bop is derivative of “mainstream” music is important to understanding how children’s entertainment has evolved beyond entertainment just for children. Kidz Bop albums are part of an even broader shift in the overall music industry, where licensing content to television shows or advertisements is an increasingly important source of revenue for cash-strapped record companies, and licensing songs to these children’s albums is just one more such venue. That these hugely popular CDs are more closely related to car ads than to “mainstream” music only underscores the marginality of children’s albums. But unlike advertisements, where selling cars is the goal and licensed music helps establish a social or emotional background for a car, with Kidz Bop ultimately the music is the focus. As the very slight repackaging of pop songs (and the explicit presentation of the CD player in the “Since U Been Gone” video) suggest, Kidz Bop is all about selling kids the “real” music, with some winking and nodding for parents’ sake that this stuff is all still brightly colored and childish.

The fourth graders at HCS responded to Kidz Bop’s music by emphasizing their enthusiasm for the childish imagery, but also by articulating an understanding of how these songs provided connections to “mainstream” music. Very early in the fall I asked them to
watch the “Since U Been Gone” video with me. They knew Kelly Clarkson’s music, and they knew Kidz Bop too—several owned more than one Kidz Bop CD. But even kids who owned the CDs had a ready critique of Kidz Bop as “fake.” Kids at pretty much all ages expressed a sense that they would rather listen to the “real” artists sing their songs. When I played the Kidz Bop video for the fourth graders, many of the students focused on the animal drawings and costumes—the particularly “childish” elements of the video. Mary repeatedly pointed out the animals that came on screen, laughing early on at the drawing labeled “Tiger on guitar.” After the video finished and I asked them to tell me about it, Heather said “I liked it! I liked the tiger, the alligator, and the walrus,” and Jesse said, “I liked all the mascots.” No one voluntarily noted the transition to the stage scene, so I asked “so first it starts out in her bedroom and then it goes to—?” Several students together said, “A stage,” and Mary jumped in, “A stage with the ANIMALS!”

I kept trying to lead them to a conversation about singing in their bedrooms and fantasies about celebrity, which I assumed they would have a lot to say about, but only finally when I asked, “and do you think that’s real?” did Dave comment, “I thought that it was just her imagination.”

“What was she imagining?

“That she was a big rock star in front of all the people.”

Here Mary jumped in again, to say, “I thought it was cool how they had all the animals!” Heather agreed, laughing, “Yeah! And they showed like the tiger dancing!”

So the HCS fourth-graders’ excitement about the Kidz Bop video centered much more on the canonically childish tropes of anthropomorphized animals—the animal costumes in the
video are very similar to the sort of full body costumes worn in children’s entertainment like Barney, Sesame Street, or at Disney World (or, as Jesse notes, by sports mascots). They only noted in response to direct questioning, and then dryly, that the video was centered around images of a child realizing a fantasy of celebrity public performance, and they expressed no personal sympathy with such a fantasy.

Despite their clear enthusiasm for the specifically childish tropes of the video, the HCS kids suggested that they understood the CDs to represent just one of several “versions” of popular songs that might be available. The connections to an adult or mainstream world, then, involved listening to different versions of songs rather than imagining themselves in adult or celebrity performances. When I asked them to explain Kidz Bop, the kids told me that “they have kids singing along to the person,” but again, they did not seem very interested in this aspect. Then Dave said (with audible scarequotes), “they make it ‘appropriate’.” I asked what it meant to make a song appropriate, and Mary said, “yeah they either block out the words or don’t have that song in it.”

I asked, “so they change the words when maybe they’re not appropriate?”

Heather: “No, just when there’s swears, they just change them.”

But then Mary seemed to switch to describing the “radio edit” versions of pop songs: “They like block it out, but you can actually tell that there was a swear there.” (Kidz Bop does not just “bleep” out words.)

And Brian piped in that, “If you buy the unedited version it has all the swears.”

The other kids scoffed at this as out of the question. But the kids’ conversation, which jumped quickly around from Kidz Bop to radio edits to “unedited” versions, seemed simply
to position Kidz Bop on the childish end of a smoothly graduated spectrum that also included mainstream, adult versions of songs. As such, music for kids would not be so much a categorical distinction from music for adults, but simply one point along a spectrum of appropriateness on which the same song might be available to children or adults. By contrast, animal costumes would categorically mark off children’s genres from adults. Thus HCS fourth graders’ responses to Kidz Bop’s tween-oriented music foregrounded both the emphatically childish images of anthropomorphic animals and the songs’ direct connections to “inappropriate” mainstream music, pointing to the same sort of ambiguity and contradiction that Cook and Kaiser argue characterizes the consumer construction of “tweens”—not so much one or the other, but both, simultaneously. In the following section I trace this layering of childish and mature in recent original music marketed to tweens, and I will argue that the tensions between tween artists’ performances of “authentic” childishness and mainstream viability are central to the production of children as a market demographic, performing a move from authentic identity and successful “assimilation” that is characteristic of and identifiable in “counterpublic” cultural productions.

Making children’s music pop: The Disney Channel

If Kidz Bop repackages mainstream music for kids, exposing the boundaries but also the intersections between children’s entertainment and mainstream content, Disney, and the Disney Channel in particular, has lately been doing something similar with original content for kids. The Disney Channel and Disney’s Hollywood Records label have produced three of the biggest music acts in the last few years. As I already mentioned, in 2006 the soundtrack
to *High School Musical* was the top-selling album of the year, and Disney had another top-ten album with the soundtrack to the Disney Channel sitcom *Hannah Montana*, about the everyday life of an eighth-grade girl who lives a double life as a pop star (Loller 2007). In 2007 Disney released popular follow-ups to both of these albums, and also introduced the Jonas Brothers, a pop-rock group of three real-life brothers, initially without an accompanying TV tie-in.\(^{21}\)

When school started in Heartsboro in the fall of 2007, *High School Musical 2* had just premiered in August on the Disney Channel, to much media fanfare and excitement among HCS students. (Second-grade girls played “high school musical” on the playground during the first few weeks, a game in which they planned to pretend to play characters from the movie, but mostly argued about who got to be “Gabriella,” the lead female character.)\(^{22}\) In June, Hannah Montana had just released her second record, a double album, titled *Hannah Montana 2/Meet Miley Cyrus*. The first CD was a country-pop soundtrack to the second season of the show, and the second was performed under the singer’s real name, Miley Cyrus, with more rock-inflected pop songs. August 2007 also saw the release of the Jonas Brothers’ first album with Disney. By Christmas the Jonas Brothers were ascendant. They never entirely displaced Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus and the *High School Musical* franchises in HCS kids’ imaginations (or in overall record sales), but they were definitely the most popular act at school in the winter and spring.

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\(^{21}\) The Jonas Brothers had released an album on Columbia Records previously, but did not achieve real popularity until after they signed with Disney’s Hollywood Records in 2007.

\(^{22}\) Though *HSM2* was released at the end of summer, its action was set on the last day of school and into summer, and the song “What Time Is It? (Summertime)” was sung by many the first weeks of school.
The current manifestation of the tween-focused Disney Channel is relatively recent, and to my knowledge has not received attention in cultural studies or media literature. So it is worth stressing that this Disney Channel is very different from the Disney of animated movies and theme parks that has traditionally received scholarly attention (e.g., Drotner 2002; Giroux 1999; Götz et al. 2005; Hunt and Frankenberg 1990; Telotte 2004; Wasko, Phillips, and Meehan 2001). Those Disney products frame child consumers as innocent and familial—“child” much more than tween. But though the Disney Channel does support other Disney products (through show tie-ins and constant advertising), its content attends more directly to the ambiguity that characterizes tween audiences.23 Another important part of Disney’s tween media is Radio Disney, which plays pop music that is “appropriate” for kids, including Disney’s own artists, other tween artists like Nickelodeon’s Drake Bell, kid-friendly Top 40 pop (Kelly Clarkson, certain songs from the Black Eyed Peas, Jordin Sparks, etc.), and even a notable selection of “oldies.”

A decade ago, Alice Cahn of the Children’s Television Workshop (now Sesame Workshop) told the New York Times, “It’s harder to get away with doing schlock television for kids now” (Mifflin 1999). A parallel change occurred in the music industry, led by Disney, as the kids entertainment industry realized that kids were an audience largely without

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23 Actually, it is not clear whether the Disney Channel supports the movies and theme parks, or vice versa. Unlike other cable networks, including its main competitor, Nickelodeon, the Disney Channel does not advertise in the traditional way, interrupting its shows every 12 minutes or so to run 15–30 second spots for third-party producers. Instead, while its shows do break at regular intervals, the advertisements it shows are for other Disney products—theme-park vacations, special prices on DVDs, upcoming TV events, etc.—along with a small number of “sponsorship messages” (“The following program is sponsored by . . . ”) (Friedman 2011). These ads tend not to emphasize direct sales so much as they raise awareness of brands and events; in this way they might be comparable to the high-production-value but ostensibly non-commercial “underwriting” spots on PBS. Radio Disney, on the other hand, does include commercial advertising, heavily directed at parents who might be listening along in the car.
access to high-quality music offerings. Disney’s pop music offerings now stand out for their high production values and sophisticated songwriting, so that the recordings themselves are not readily distinguishable from standard pop radio fare. (To an extent *HSM* is an exception to this, because it follows the conventions of musical theater more than Top 40 pop, so the songs are more earnest and organized around character and narrative somewhat more than radio-friendly hooks.) Disney Channel executive Rich Ross pointed out that kids had been “looking for more sophisticated content” (Mayo 2007). Steven Pritchard of EMI (who represent Disney’s catalogue in the UK) noted that music for children has long been “a market where there is an absence of pop music” (Dodd 2007). Walt Disney Records (which puts out the *HSM* soundtracks) executive Damon Whiteside suggested that Disney’s musical offerings were moving toward music that is “still safe, but it’s got a little bit of an edge” (Levine 2006). Just as Kidz Bop managed to make Top 40 songs “kid friendly” with some minor, surface-level adjustments to their sound and content, Disney led the way in making original music for kids “pop,” simply by adhering to the genre conventions of pop music.

Disney’s music is “childish” only in the absence of strong language or explicit content, and in the age of the performers (Miley Cyrus, the Jonas Brothers, and the stars of *High School Musical* were 14–17 years old in 2007). Another Disney act, the Cheetah Girls, provide a good example of how Disney’s music takes essential characteristics of mainstream pop (including a “little bit of an edge”) and scrubs them of potentially offensive elements. The Cheetah Girls are an all-girl singing group that debuted in 2006, around the time the hypersexual Pussycat Dolls were popular.\(^{24}\) It is hard not to see the similarities between the

\(^{24}\) The Cheetah Girls had also filmed two television movies that aired in 2003 and 2006.
Cheetah Girls and the Pussycat dolls: both were multi-ethnic girl groups with “cat” references in their names; the Pussycat Dolls’ 2005 debut album was titled PCD; the Cheetah Girls’ 2007 debut studio album was TCG. Like any grown-up girl group, the Cheetah Girls dance and sing R&B pop songs. Unlike the other Disney acts, they are multi-ethnic, with an “urban” style, and their music often has a Latin sound, as in their single, “Fuego,” which follows an early-decade trend where music by Latino artists like Shakira, Jennifer Lopez, and Ricky Martin, with occasional Spanish-language lyrics, was popular. (The cast of HSM is ethnically diverse, but the characters are all emphatically clean-cut and suburban. The “class” conflict that drives the narrative is between the middle-class protagonists and the fabulously wealthy villain.) But in contrast to groups like the aggressively sexual Pussy Cat Dolls, the Cheetah Girls’ sexuality is thoroughly backgrounded. Their dance moves are never very suggestive, and their costumes, though sometimes tight-fitting, are not very revealing. In the video for “Fuego,” for instance, all three Cheetah Girls cover their legs below the knees in most shots, and wear multiple layers.

The Hannah Montana show specifically toys with tropes of childhood and public participation, as it is structured around the conceit of a “normal” girl (Miley Stewart) leading a double life as a pop star (Hannah Montana). (This theme is similar to that in the Kidz Bop video for “Since U Been Gone,” discussed above). The theme song, “The Best of Both Worlds,” specifically addresses this tension with a message that “you can have it all.” The motivating “situation” of the episodes involves the question of maintaining family and friendship intimacies despite Miley/Hannah’s double life. The show includes many jokes at the expense of the adult music world, as Miley/Hannah and her friends in disguise will act
childishly (getting covered in grossness, say) to the chagrin of uptight adults. The *High School Musical* movies includes themes relevant to children with songs about school (“What Time Is It? (Summertime)”) and athletics (“Get’cha Head in the Game”). And the Jonas Brothers, who in 2007 might have been the least “childish” of Disney’s offerings, still released explicitly kid-related singles like “Kids of the Future,” along with standard pop-radio fare like “S.O.S.” and “Hold On,” and serious love songs like “Hello Beautiful.” So while these three acts are somewhat age-graded (with its musical-theater camp *HSM* runs slightly younger than Hannah Montana, who connected with a slightly younger audience than the Jonas Brothers, who quickly capitalized on their appeal to younger teenagers), but there is so much overlap that the effect of this age-grading is to provide a ladder to bring younger music to older kids and older music to younger kids. Such broad overlap among audiences of different ages is characteristic of a still-emerging “tween” industry, and contrasts markedly with the precise division of age-groups characteristic of children’s marketing more broadly.

The Disney Channel does not seem to present quite such an oppositional orientation toward adults as does Nickelodeon. The limits on Nickelodeon’s anti-adult sentiments are parental objections to the content their kids’ consume, but Disney goes so far as to aspire to “launch some of its acts into the mainstream, adult audience and all” (Dodd 2007), and so far it has been remarkably successful. (The goal, that is, would be for grown ups to listen to an artist like Miley Cyrus earnestly, not ironically they way they might watch *Spongebob Squarepants.*) *HSM* stars Zac Efron, Vanessa Hudgens, and Ashley Tisdale (among others), have all had independent careers subsequent to *HSM*, but for years they also continued to star in *HSM* sequels and routinely appear on major awards show *in their capacity as HSM stars.*
Miley Cyrus no longer records as Hannah Montana, but the show is still running and Cyrus is still affiliated with Hollywood Records. The Jonas Brothers early success depended on marketing through the Disney Channel, including guest appearances on *Hannah Montana* and starring in a Disney Channel–original movie, *Camp Rock* (which also launched the career of Demi Lovato, another current tween star). But unlike the others they were fundamentally a music act, and their transition to mainstream popularity was not dragged down by an awkward affiliation with a kiddie TV show. Nonetheless, despite gaining success and then an easy route to freedom from Disney, in May 2009 the Jonas Brothers returned to the Disney Channel with a silly, gag-filled half-hour sitcom of their own, *JONAS L.A*. So all of these acts broke into the mainstream without having to shed their Disney Channel identities—to awkwardly “graduate” to mainstream audiences, as celebrities Britney Spears or Lindsey Lohan had to do.

The Disney Channel, like Nickelodeon, would once have been something of a children’s television ghetto, from which artists would struggle to break out. But, partly through sheer force of demographic market power, now the mainstream music industry appears to have no choice but to accept these children’s media artists as members in good standing. As Miley Cyrus and the Jonas Brothers produce relatively standard pop songs, Disney is doing something similar to Kidz Bop, in bringing mainstream music to children, by coding it however trivially as childish. But it also does the opposite: taking music *originally* produced for children and expanding its reach to capture the mainstream. There is a back-and-forth here, where children’s media colonizes the mainstream just as much as the mainstream colonizes children’s media.
Can the biggest acts in the country be between anything?

Despite Disney’s efforts at easing the transition of its acts and its audience from the children’s media ghetto and fully into the mainstream, the categories child and adult are so contested that this process is never smooth. The mainstreaming of tween pop has been a constant site of public anxiety about children’s sexuality and vulnerability. The liminal logic of “tween” as “between” necessarily leads to tensions when carried into the mainstream, as the boundaries of its “others” are simultaneously sharpened and eroded. These tensions come to a head when public figures representing mainstream and tween media share the stage at televised “awards” shows, performing onstage the conflicts that emerge as tweens increasingly occupy the limelight.

Sex is a key issue, as it always is with younger celebrities (and with female celebrities). Neutralizing sex as a possible source of controversy is a key component of Disney’s creative production, as in the example of the Cheetah Girls. But sex and sexuality remains such a charged issue that it still saturates the mainstream reception of Disney’s pop stars. In the spring of 2008, for instance, near the peak of her popularity, Miley Cyrus did a photo shoot with Annie Leibovitz for *Vanity Fair*, in which she appeared without a top (though covered with a blanket) at age 15. The next year, at 16, Cyrus performed at the Teen Choice Awards in a revealing outfit and dancing with a pole—which uncomfortable viewers interpreted as suggestive of exotic dancing. She received a lot of criticism from adults and fans alike for apparently exceeding the limits of age-appropriate behavior. One eleven-year-old told the *New York Times* in 2010, “I feel like she acts 25. She looks so old. She is too old for herself” (Holson 2010). (In 2008 students at HCS reacted less strongly to the *Vanity Fair* incident,
expressing mostly indifference, rather than outrage or frustration, to Miley Cyrus as they
turned their attention to the Jonas Brothers.) At the same time, Cyrus’s song “Party in the
USA,” was a major radio hit in the summer of 2009, and she appeared to have fully “broken
through” to mainstream celebrity, though this success may have come with a diminution in
popularity with children and tweens (Holston 2010). The impossible position in which Cyrus
found herself trying to reconcile sexuality, child audiences, and public performance is
apparent in two contradictory responses from industry insiders to her “scandals.” After the
semi-nude photo shoot, a Disney Channel Worldwide executive told Portfolio magazine,
“For Miley Cyrus to be a ‘good girl’ is now a business decision for her. Parents have invested
in her a godliness. If she violates that trust, she won’t get it back” (Barnes 2008). Compare
that “business decision” with a comment from an editor at US Magazine in response to the
TCA performance: “She already has this risque image, so it really wasn’t much of a stretch
. . . That’s how Britney took off. She was the good girl gone bad, and it looks to be working
for Miley as well” (Kahn 2009:17). Despite Cyrus’s clear success at overcoming the
contradictions between niche and mass appeal and bringing together young listeners and
mainstream audiences, we seem to lack discourses for understanding and acknowledging
such blurring of boundaries. There does not seem to be any middle ground between
“godliness” and the “good girl gone bad.”

The constant attention to and censuring of Cyrus’s public performances of sexuality are
not simply about her age; of course impossible and hypocritical virgin/whore expectations
are commonplace for adult women celebrities too. But it is interesting to note that the Jonas
Brothers also profess their asexuality as they show off their “promise rings”—worn to
express their commitment to abstain from sex until marriage. (Male celebrities tend not to voluntarily take onto themselves the sexual hypocrisy their women colleagues have to deal with.) The Jonas Brothers’ purity rings were also the subject of “controversy.” In a reversal of the censure that followed Miley Cyrus’s displays of sexuality, the Jonas Brothers were made light of at the 2008 MTV Video Music Awards by host Russell Brand for refusing their sexuality (the VMAs aired only a few weeks after my fieldwork in Heartsboro concluded). Onstage at the VMAs, the public figures involved seemed to represent the emerging opposition between tween and adult media, embodying and articulating a solidarity among tween artists and audiences, and sharpening the lines between the categories of kid and adult. Sex and vulnerability were an issue here as well, but, notably, “vulnerable” kids publicly and prominently began to assert themselves, ironically using precisely the “childish” notion of their vulnerability as a powerful resource in claiming public agency against dismissive and critical adults.

Televised awards shows have been filled with tween stars the last few years, and hosts frequently make jokes at their expense. Pointing out stars like the Jonas Brothers or Zac Efron in the audience seems to be a punchline in itself, at times, suggesting a sort of bewilderment on the part of show hosts at the popularity of these youthful stars. At the VMAs in 2008, host Russell Brand, a British comedian whose act is intentionally vulgar and “shocking,” made fun of the Jonas Brothers’ promise rings and ridiculed their abstinence: “It is a little bit ungrateful, cause they could literally have sex with any woman that they want, they’re just not gonna do it” (suggesting that the Jonas Brothers, rather than still “children,” were individuals of an age that they “should” have sex). Brand continued to riff on the Jonas
Brothers’ virginity throughout the show, until Jordin Sparks, who had won *American Idol* the year before at 17, came on to introduce an award. Sparks immediately moved to the microphone and said, “All right I just have one thing to say about promise rings. It’s not bad to wear a promise ring cause not everybody, guy or girl, wants to be a slut.” Brand’s good-natured poking fun of the Jonas Brothers for being virgins was now being seriously thrown back at him in much stronger terms. Sparks, it appeared, was standing up, publicly, in solidarity with other young artists, and suggesting that their values might be significantly different, even preferable. The next time Brand was on stage, he apologized: “I’ve got to say sorry, cause I said them things about promise rings. That were bad of me. I don’t mean to take it lightly or whatever. I love the Jonas Brothers, think it’s really good, and you know, look, let me be honest, I don’t want to piss off teenage fans all right? In fact, quite the opposite— So promise rings, I’m well up for it, well done everyone. It’s just you know a bit of sex occasionally never hurt anybody.” Sparks later appeared on Fox News Channel’s *Hannity & Colmes* to be praised for her defense of non-sluttiness.

Sparks’s fêting by conservative political pundit Sean Hannity points to a potential sympathy between cultural conservatives and kids entertainment. Kids entertainment companies are at pains to neutralize controversies around sex, and content scrubbed of sexual material and artists pledged to abstinence yield products that are (perhaps incidentally) amenable to conservatives otherwise suspicious of popular media. But the willingness of

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25 Other interesting moments at the 2008 VMAs: Four members of the cast of HSM (Zac Efron, Vanessa Hudgens, Corbin Bleu, and Ashley Tisdale), there promoting *High School Musical 3*, introduced a performance by Christina Aguilera. Zac Efron’s line, “The next artist hit the scene when she was just a kid,” has a different meaning coming from him and his colleagues, underscoring Aguilera’s shared Disney past in her early role on the Mickey Mouse Club. And when Russell Brand “catches” Miley Cyrus playing the video game *Rock Band*, he yells at her, “Oy! Miley! Grow up!” The show was chock full of such references to childishness and kid stars.
reactionary figures like Hannity to embrace artists like Sparks also points to some larger cultural shifts. The fact that children are active consumers of publicly circulating entertainment media is already a profound disruption of “traditional” family and household norms. If sexuality is the only front on which conservatives campaign around kids’ media, children’s media can ironically have the effect of reinforcing traditional sexual values while simultaneously striking a sustained blow against traditional understandings of domesticity.

The next year at the VMAs there was an even more prominent collision between adult and tween stars, this time not around sex. Nineteen-year-old country-pop singer Taylor Swift’s first success came at age 16, and she continued to be hugely popular with tweens and to write songs and star in videos with school and teenage themes. Swift won the Best Female Video award for her “You Belong to Me” video, a conventional narrative video about high-school romance, over visually and conceptually groundbreaking videos by Beyoncé and Lady Gaga. As Swift, clearly overcome by the recognition, began her acceptance speech, rapper Kanye West (who had developed a reputation for unpredictable behavior at awards ceremonies) also ran onto the stage, grabbed the microphone from Swift, and said, “Yo Taylor, I’m really happy for you, I’m gonna let you finish, but Beyoncé had one of the best videos of ALL TIME. One of the best videos of all time.” He shrugged and handed the microphone back to Swift, who was speechless. Swift’s microphone was cut off as her time ran out, and the show cut to a prerecorded skit. Later in the show Beyoncé won another award and had Swift come onstage and use her time to give the acceptance speech she missed out on earlier. West was widely vilified in the press and on the Internet as a jerk to the young and sensitive Swift. Ten minutes later in the show, Justin Bieber, a 15-year-old singer who
had only just broken out, and Miranda Cosgrove, the star of Nickelodeon’s popular show, 
iCarly, came out to introduce a performance. Like Sparks the year before, the very young-
looking Bieber interrupted the script to say, “First of all, I’d just like to say give it up for 
Taylor Swift she deserved that award!” Cosgrove concurred: “Yeah! Whooo! Taylor Swift!” 
Cosgrove and Bieber went on to introduce Swift herself in a performance of the winning 
song. West later apologized—on his website, on the Jay Leno Show, and directly to Swift 
(Martens and Villareal 2009; Moody 2009).

The good-natured, if insistent, tone of Brand’s prodding of the Jonas Brothers—who 
seemed to be willingly submitting to, even inviting, the sort of sexual hypocrisy that 
normally only female celebrities have to endure (almost like they were rubbing it in Miley 
Cyrus’s face)—was overwhelmed by Sparks’s reactionary application of the awful term 
“slut” to Brand and, presumably, his ilk. Kanye West expressed a widely shared opinion—
Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies” was commonly understood to be innovative, groundbreaking, and 
among a small group of truly great videos—but the nation rose up in righteous horror at his 
impoliteness to a young, accessible, and vulnerable singer (whose youth, accessibility, and 
vulnerability were central elements of her celebrity persona and success). The apparent 
injustice in Beyoncé’s being “robbed” of a prize she clearly deserved was buried beneath the 
outrage. West, who seemed to be publicly standing up for a strongly held conviction, was 
forced instead to publicly grovel before tween artist Swift. More and more mainstream stars 
submit to the demographic power of young audiences: for instance, R&B singer Usher, 
rapper Ludacris, and dancehall artist Sean Kingston all collaborated with Justin Bieber on his 
recent album.
Solidarity

I am interested in these moment at the VMAs as very public collisions between adult and “kid” performers, whose audiences, in truth, overlap significantly (the audience for pop music is overwhelmingly young). Both incidents at the VMAs were potentially intelligible without reference to age demographics. The Brand-Sparks encounter was, in part, just another flare up in the culture wars, an existing framework into which young artists like Sparks or the Jonas Brothers could easily be slotted (hence Sparks’s appearance on Hannity & Colmes as a courageous exemplar of “values”). The West-Swift incident fits less neatly into any one framework, except that it fits so neatly into all the available frameworks: a confident adult black male hip-hop superstar aggressively dominating a meek young white woman country singer-songwriter. Just as the impossible expectations placed on Miley Cyrus synthesize the sexual hypocrisy enforced on female performers with the sexual contradictions expected of children, the incidents at the VMAs were not simply matters of young artists putting older artists in their place.

But in the expressions of solidarity among young celebrities, supporting one another against the apparently unfair and powerful attacks of mainstream adult stars, we can see them claiming each other as members of a group. If their ages and mainstream success made Swift and Sparks potentially marginal figures in tween entertainment, the Jonas Brothers and Justin Bieber were full members, who were understood first and foremost as tween stars. (Perhaps by virtue of their maleness and whiteness, their age is the first “marked” aspect of their identities, going down the list). Despite not necessarily being identified primarily as a tween star by others, Sparks herself seemed to demonstrate an identification with whatever group
the Jonas Brothers represented, by presuming to speak for them, or at least in their defense. And lest the cultural conservatism obscure the age identification, Brand returned to the stage to emphasize the that the powerful group for whom Sparks spoke was precisely an audience specified by age—“teenage fans”—rather than political affiliation. (The audience for Brand’s own style of shock comedy presumably includes many teenagers. His invocation of “teenage fans” clearly distinguished them as “other” than whatever groups of teenagers and young people he would normally feel comfortable addressing as his audience, and he seems to have meant something more like “tween-age.”) Whereas Sparks claimed for herself the role of spokesperson for tween artists, Justin Bieber interpellated Taylor Swift as someone with whom he has solidarity, and thus, despite her almost two decades, a member in good standing of whatever group he and Miranda Cosgrove represent. (It is difficult to imagine 15-year-old Bieber feeling comfortable speaking up on national television for an “adult” artist.) Russell Brand and Kanye West, on the other hand, seemed to dismiss the Jonas Brothers and Taylor Swift as marginal curiosities undeserving of respect or, in West’s case, even notice, until the overwhelming power of tween solidarity forced them to show deference.

Tweens’ “power,” of course, derives substantially from adults who mobilize on behalf of put-upon kids. The commercial interests invested in acts like the Jonas Brothers would certainly feel along with Brand that the “teenage fans” are not an audience to be glibly dismissed, and Brand’s apology might well be the result of direct or understood pressure from MTV and the other corporate backers of the VMAs. In addition to direct commercial interest, an unlikely resource in the emerging power of tweens is a widespread cultural logic that understands children as powerless—vulnerable, even helpless—and the more mundane
compunctions not to “pick on” kids. Sparks’s “defensive” response—though certainly the most aggressive act described here—positioned Brand as the attacker, and an unprovoked attack on “children” by an adult (in this case a rather disheveled, dangerous-looking adult) is of course completely unacceptable in polite society, because the power dynamics are asymmetrical; children can’t defend themselves against such attacks. The irony here is that Sparks could and did defend herself and her peers. The logic of vulnerability applied in even greater force to the encounter between West and Swift, where the absence of sexual politics made the asymmetry of a powerful adult man “attacking” a meek young woman much more apparent. By going after the Jonas Brothers or Taylor Swift, Brand and West immediately lost any moral advantage that might have motivated them. Thus the construction of childhood as naturally innocent and vulnerable is mobilized as a powerful resource in tweens increasing claims of authority and agency on a public stage.

A tween counterpublic?

So what are the politics of tween entertainment? Do tweens, their voices amplified through the mediation of global media corporations like Disney, seek a “voice,” recognition, emancipation, the franchise? In the 1960s and 1970s a radical “youth liberation” movement argued through the language of identity politics that “young people in the United States were an oppressed group, unjustly and systematically subjected to adult authority and age discrimination” (T. Cole 2010:3). These groups organized “undergrounds,” and called for “complete freedom of speech, assembly, and religion for young people, but also for an end to compulsory education, the right to form communal, non-nuclear families, sexual self-
determination, and even an end to child labor laws, so that children could be ‘economically independent of adults’” (T. Cole 2010:9). By comparison, EMI’s Pritchard referred to the music market tapped by Miley Cyrus and others as “like a mini pop underground for the very young” (Dodd 2007, emphasis added)—applying, perhaps fancifully, the language of alternative music scenes, or even of radical political movements, to 7–12-year-old girls who convince their parents to take them to a pop concert.

But maybe applying the language of identity politics to tweens is not so fanciful. I argued in the previous chapter that an expressive practices approach to social reproduction in schools can be neatly expanded to include childhood as one more subordinate category, along with class, gender, and ethnicity, among others, that is constructed in and through schooling. Similarly, observing the exploding presence of children in public consumer spaces, the analytical language of identity commonly used to explain feminist, queer, or youth-culture movements might be applied felicitously to children (note again Banet-Weiser’s point that Nickelodeon self-consciously uses politicized tropes from queer culture, feminism, and multiculturalism to construct oppositional visions of childhood). “Tween” media positions kids as legitimate consumers is the public marketplace, but also, through anticipatory tropes of maturity and contradictory tropes of (sexual) innocence, as particular, marked subjects, following a familiar logic:

It is at the very moment of recognizing ourselves as the mass subject, for example, that we also recognize ourselves as minority subjects. As participants in the mass subject, we are the “we” that can describe our particular affiliations of class, gender, sexual orientation, race, or subculture [or age] only as “they.” This self-alienation is common to all of the contexts of publicity, but it can be variously interpreted within each. (Warner 1992:387)
We can see, for instance, the reinforcing dialectic of marginality and participation, of authenticity and assimilation, that is common to identity politics movements playing out in the alternately “childish” and mature presentations of children’s media. By inscribing children’s amateur voices and phantasmagorical imagery into its products, Kidz Bop balances “authentically” childish repertoires with music consumption practices that position kids as pretty normal audiences. Appeals to the “vulnerability” of kids in criticisms of adults “picking on” them frame celebrities with normative tropes of childhood, despite those celebrities’ presence on major televised stages. Portrayals of artists as “asexual” are essentially infantilizing moves that characterize them as children more so than the adults or adolescents that they may actually be. Depictions of celebrities’ personal life similarly present visions of authentic childishness: Miley Cyrus, for instance, released on the Internet a series of apparently impromptu home videos in which she and her “girlfriends”—other Disney personalities—appeared without makeup or stage costume, in what were ostensibly girlish sleepovers during which they playfully talked into their computer’s webcam. I think it is useful to view these depictions of authentic tropes of childishness in parallel with notions such as “musical blackness” (Gaunt 2006) or the “eternal feminine” (Beauvoir [1952] 1989). Authentic childishness, like blackness or femininity, is not a naturally occurring characteristic but rather an essentializing and marginalizing discourse (Radano 2003; Butler 1990). As Ito points out, the childish tropes of kids media are “engineered social productions” rather than a “natural childhood pleasure principle” (2005b:100), though children’s media seem to play both sides of this dialectic successfully, at least so far. The usefulness of this appeal to authenticity is that marginality can be seen alternately as a site for
powerful critique and transformation (e.g., Hanchard 1994), or as a space of exclusion and disenfranchisement, and this is the tension that allows children to articulate their powerful public presence precisely as vulnerable, private, childish children. The things about childhood that make it seem unsuitable to public participation are also the things that allow it to be articulated in terms of solidarity and group identity upon entry into the public sphere.

That this politics of childhood takes place in the sphere of consumer entertainment should not be unexpected. Warner suggests that politics as it is conducted in the Habermasian public sphere is closed to individuals and groups whose inescapably marked bodies prevent them from full participation in disembodied acts of rational-critical discourse (1992). And as Timothy Cole shows, the experience of the youth liberation activists was that their attempts at advocacy and argument were met with wildly disproportionate adult reactions, shouted down by crowds of adults and systematically suppressed by institutional and state power (2010:3). Rational-critical persuasion is not the province of minors. Instead, “minoritized subjects ha[ve] few strategies open to them, but one [is] to carry their unrecuperated positivity into consumption” (Warner 1992:384), since the consumer sphere is at least less interested in excluding potential customers. Thus, Banet-Weiser argues persuasively that what Nickelodeon performs is a sort of “consumer citizenship,” providing a venue through which children constitute themselves as a public—and, as a public, they increasingly gain authority and independence in public.

Therefore, the emergence of tweens as a group that is increasingly able to speak up for itself makes sense as a straightforward example of a “public” (Warner 2002)—a social space created by the reflexive circulation of expressive discourse (read: entertainment media).
Insofar as this expanding tween public is constituted negatively—through explicit opposition to adults in the case of Nickelodeon or the VMA incidents, by signs of differentiation from a pre-constituted adult public sphere as in the case of Kidz Bop’s products, or simply because “between” requires something not itself on either side—it is a counterpublic. Children have always been excluded from public—such exclusion is perhaps the definitive characteristic of modern childhoods (Stephens 1995). But the last three decades have witnessed sustained mass-mediated dispute over the proper role of kids, not just as individual in public, but as a public. Sparks’s and Bieber’s comments positioned themselves as individuals who could legitimately speak for a dispersed group constructed through this spiraling circulation of discourse, in opposition to representatives of another group, performing on TV for everyone to see the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that Warner argues are inherent in the constitution of any public, or any counterpublic, for that matter (2002:81).

Importantly, these displays of tween solidarity produce a category to which not only celebrities affiliate. By participating as active audiences, by engaging as the sort of consumers to whom products like Kidz Bop are marketed, kids allow themselves to be interpellated as members of the same public to which Justin Bieber and Jordin Sparks affiliate; a public “exists by virtue of being addressed” (Warner 2002:50). Notably, such a transnational public creates a category to which children might affiliate that transcends and cuts across the bounds of family (whereas “normally” children’s affiliations of religion, community, class, ethnicity, are only ever through their primary membership in a family). A “tween public” is a group to which a child may belong even though her parents do not.
The process of identification with a public is specifically expressive, not just categorical. Counterpublics are constructed through tropes that indexically identify members but that are also constructed as negative indexes, as contrasting with dominant, rational-critical discourse:

A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public and to the hierarchy among media. The discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternative idiom, but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness [cf. fart jokes and animal costumes] . . . Friction against the dominant public forces the poetic-expressive character of counterpublic discourse to become salient to consciousness. (Warner 2002:86)

Which is, well, how an orange splatter of slime comes to be the logo of Nickelodeon, and “sliming” adults its gleefully iconic trope, building off of, and then reinforcing, phantasmagoria and coprophilia as master tropes of children’s counterpublic identities.26

Phantasmagoria and intimacy are not quite sufficient to outline the “poetic-expressive character” of a childhood counterpublic. The last fundamental element in the construction of children as public participants is an apparently contradictory notion that consumerism is itself an authentic aspect of childhood. On the one hand the innocence and sheltered domesticity expected of children condemns particular configurations of childhood in public (cf. Boyden 1990). But the same innocence, naïveté, and credulousness that are supposed to make children unsuited for public roles like working for pay also mark children as particularly susceptible to the pleasures and intrusions of consumer culture. This linking of childhood and

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26 Nickelodeon recently stopped using the slime splatter as its logo, in order to have a consistent logo across channels for teens and younger children as well as tweens (Challand 2009; Schneider 2009), but they continue to use slime on air.
commerce is apparent in perspectives such as Barber’s (2007), discussed at the beginning of this chapter, which sees the activities and expectations of consumerism as by definition juvenile. But if consumerism is inherently childish, then children are authentic and natural consumers. Such a view is visible in the increasing use of “tween” as an everyday term by parents and educators, as marketers have successfully invested their ambitious new subdivision of the consumer market with the authority of a developmental phase. Tween entertainment successes are regularly described in the media as “marketing phenomena,” so news reports about acts like Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus or High School Musical invariably include comments from “marketing” consultants who gush about Disney’s marketing prowess (e.g., Armstrong 2009; Farmer 2007; Mason 2007; Quemener 2008; Keveney 2007). Such stories relate astonishment at kids’ enthusiasm for high-quality media products and suggest a sense of distrust of kids’ discernment—a view that kids’ commercial activities are necessarily manipulated by commercial interests. But if kids’ are simply the unwitting dupes of corporate manipulation, the implication is still that their rapidly expanding public culture is inherently and unavoidably commercial. Consumption seems to be the inextricable implication of the construction of childhood as innocent, impulsive, and vulnerable, and thus ironically tied up with well-meaning adults’ desires to “protect” children from commercialization. Kids’ culture, it seem, is authentically capitalist, which is strange, since kids are supposed to be naturally innocent and domestic subjects, for whom capitalism poses a fundamental threat.
Coda: Bringing entertainment media into an expressive practices framework

In the previous chapter, I outlined a largely one dimensional, top-down framework, in which power and authority reside in the massive bureaucratic institutions of education and government, and those in social groups (including children) without access to that authority band together in communal defense of their uncommodified communication through repeated performances of intimate expressivity (in a nutshell). But governmental bureaucracies of schooling are not the only powerful, globalized, instrumental institutions in children’s lives. The consumer and entertainment industries are certainly as much of a presence in kids’ lives as education, and, as I hope to have demonstrated, they are equally invested in constructing a suitable vision of childhood among kids and adults. So while Foley provides a near-complete analysis of the way that binary divisions of expressive repertoires structure the social life of schools at a micro- and macro-level, he gives little attention to how entertainment media is incorporated into students’ intimate expressive practices, as a resource for claiming intimate solidarity with one another, in opposition to the instrumental frameworks of classroom lessons. In fact, when Foley does address popular culture, he makes almost exactly the opposite point:

Our everyday national popular culture is generally inculcating people with an instrumental style of speech. Americans “culturally reproduce” their individualistic, competitive, and materialistic society through using this alienating, manipulative communicative style. The class segments most deeply integrated into the popular culture practices of leisure and consumption are the most thoroughly socialized and consequently they become the most competent in impression management techniques. As indicated, cultural institutions like schools showcase and valorize these moments of instrumental communication. (1990:193–94)

Foley’s use of “American popular culture” focuses on such activities as school sports and dances, and an orientation toward athletics and school-sponsored dances can certainly be
seen to reproduce students’ institutional orientations. But this sense of “popular culture” is certainly too narrow, and may not apply to such popular-cultural fields as music or television. It would be very difficult to argue that childish, silly, and phantasmagoric entertainment forms “showcase and valorize . . . instrumental communication.”

My question in this dissertation is to understand how the logic of childhood counterpublics that is playing out in the entertainment media is brought to bear in the hierarchical constructions of childhood as a subordinate identity in school. Does the presentation of children as a powerful public group in media and commerce provide a resource by which kids can challenge adult authority in schools? How does a mass-mediated logic of counterpublic participation inflect kids’ everyday peer culture—and how do kids’ peer cultural traditions inflect their membership in this emerging public? What role do entertainment media—important repositories of “expressive practices”—play in the expressive production of difference and social stratification in schools?

To conclude this chapter, I return briefly to the micro-analytic literature in educational linguistics. Linguistic anthropologist Betsy Rymes’s writing repeatedly returns to a moment during a phonics lesson in which materials from an entertainment franchise intrude into a classroom lesson (2003, 2004, 2008). In Rymes’s example, a six-year-old boy, upon

27 The idea that the management class is the most “deeply integrated into the popular culture practices of leisure and consumption” seems untenable on its face, even for a statement made decades ago. That consumer practices are differentiated by class and economic status is a commonplace idea at least since Bourdieu’s Distinction (1984), and is demonstrable using available evidence for the contemporary U.S. (Friedland et al. 2007; Holt 1998). It is difficult to know what Foley might mean when he suggests that there is a single set of “popular culture practices” in which only bourgeois individuals participate.

28 Here Eckert’s analysis is useful, as she demonstrates that the relevant factor positioning kids’ popular cultural participation as a marker of class is the extent to which any cultural form (sports and school clubs as opposed to smoking or certain genres of music) is linked to or officially sponsored by the bureaucratic, instrumental institution of the school (1989).
sounding out the word “chancy” on a flashcard, exclaimed “ohp!” and looked quickly to his friend and classmate. Both smiled and said together, “It’s a Pokémon!”—playfully mishearing the word on the flashcard as “Chansey,” the name of a character from the trading cards and video games that continue to be popular among school-aged boys (see Tobin 2004). The boys shared a smile as they forgot the phonics lesson, but just as they began a new conversation about Pokémons, the teacher quickly reprimanded them, redirecting their attention to the phonics task with “you need to listen.” A clear example emerges of the contrast and conflict between the decontextualized, essayist, instrumental stance and the contextual, social, and intimate stance: “As [the two boys] both recognize the word and its meaning through reference to the world of Pokémon, the teacher insists that they make meaning of this word though phonological content alone, and the interaction transforms into a duel over which forms of context should be used to decipher meaning” (2003:132).

Rymes initially analyzes the competing “contexts” as a moment of “contrasting zones of comfortable competence,” pointing out that teachers are “comfortable” in an authoritative, directing role, with the pedagogical content fixed and discernible, while kids, she suggests, are more comfortable with the materials of popular culture and entertainment. Rymes suggests that teachers might do well to incorporate popular culture references into literacy lessons, arguing that students “will jump at the chance to use the cultural resources they have available to them creatively—to talk about them, make jokes about them, recombine them, and use them in active, critical, and insightful ways to connect with each other and to understand their connection with the world” (2004:333). But Rymes’s initial analysis, by focusing on the popular cultural content as the site of the boys’ “comfortable competence,”
neglects the boys’ shared grin as they reoriented away from the lesson and toward one another. For teachers to fit Pokémon into the flashcards and writing prompts of literacy education would be simply to claim kids’ entertainment not so much as “context,” but as one more decontextualized field of componential knowledge.

But to claim Pokémon as just one more repository of componential knowledge for teachers’ lessons neglects the fact that Pokémon is not simply another, neutral “context.” Instead, Pokémon is powerful precisely because it is inappropriate; in Warner’s words, “it is not merely a different or alternative idiom,” but one that is “regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness” (2002:86). A phonics lesson is normatively instrumental (rational-critical): IRE, essayist, and decontextualized in its focus on the phonological content of letters on the page (which are separated componentially as individual meaning-bearing units; cf. Tedlock 1983), as it uses the power and authority of school to flatten out the intimate and contextual relationships between participants—teachers and students who know one another and have familiar ways of interacting. And the boys’ shared smile about a Pokémon pun is characteristically intimate: fully contextualized and indexical, as their glance to one another breaks the participation framework of the lesson by reasserting a friendship connection that orients around shared knowledge of material derived from media contexts outside the classroom. So here we see entertainment media fitting neatly within the intimate expressive style, latent with all the potential of intimate expressivity for oppositionality, resistance, and the construction of class or group solidarity—contrasting with Foley’s claim that “popular culture . . . inculcat[es] people with an instrumental style of speech” (1990:193). Rather, the opposite is emphatically the case: in sharing this punning, poetic interpretation of the sounds
of the word on the flashcard, the boys in Rymes’s example interpellate one another as members of a mediated childhood counterpublic which is constituted precisely by moves like this—and which is “counter,” precisely, to the rational-critical poetics of “phonics lessons” that they would be placing themselves within were they to be the type of audience that read the word as “chancy.”

The boys’ turn to one another is the sort of act that is constitutive of their oppositional childhood subjectivities in a bureaucratic school context that seeks to interpellate them differently, and which is (legitimately) threatened by their solidarity. This interpellating look between friends parallels the public performances of solidarity in which tween celebrities interpellate one another as members of a group, and representatives of an audience, in opposition to an imputed adult “mainstream.” In a later piece Rymes reanalyzes this “Chansey” moment from the perspective of Goffmanian “participation frameworks,” suggesting that such popular cultural references “can suddenly create a participation framework that includes relevant classroom peers and excludes the teacher” (2008:4). This is certainly correct, but neglects, again, the breadth and depth of the fields of power that are being called upon in these cute and momentary interactions.

In the following chapters, I turn my attention to those acts of “turning to one another” that take place in school and are constantly mediated through consumer technologies and entertainment media. I investigate the question of childhood solidarity raised in these two chapters by exploring in fine-grained detail how children use media texts, channels, and paraphernalia to consolidate and negotiate their face-to-face social environments. These broader cultural logics of intimacy and solidarity in the commercial construction of
childhood publics in opposition to mainstream popular culture are paralleled in everyday interactions with and around media—especially portable music devices—that articulate a peer-cultural intimacy and solidarity in opposition to adult authority in school.
Chapter 3

Earbuds Are Good for Sharing: Intimate Connections and the Social Economy of Children’s Headphone Use in School

This chapter examines the intimate embedding of headphones, and the portable music players to which they were attached, in the social interactions of students at Heartsboro Central School. Students’ broad ownership and use of portable music devices made them the most prominent media channels at HCS. Listening together to MP3 players, kids activated and delineated relationships and social hierarchies. They solidified certain types of social bonds by sharing headphones with one another; and with the same actions they enforced and regulated the often exclusive and hierarchical organization of children and adults in school. MP3 players bundled with headphone cables circulated among lockers, desks, pockets, and backpacks. Wires threaded under clothing and tangled across crowded lunchroom tables. Hanging from a shoulder or shirt collar, maxed-out earbuds strained to liven up group spaces with portable, lo-fi background music. Most often two friends would share a pair of earbuds—one for me, one for you—listening together with one ear as they participated in the dense overlap of talk, touch, and gesture that characterized their unmonitored peer interactions. As students moved from the relative freedom of the hallway, playground, and lunchroom into adult-structured classes, their music players disappeared at the classroom door. In class, students listened surreptitiously to earbuds concealed in sleeves and under the hoods of sweatshirts. Within the complex logic of genre, celebrity, and consumerism that
informed HCS children’s musical tastes and habits, what stood out during my fieldwork was the intimate embedding of earbuds as social anchors among the networks and hierarchies of these elementary- and middle-school children. Upsetting the instrumental and rationalizing logics of privatization and isolation that accrue to headphones and portable music, HCS children creatively reimagined their music devices to fit within the persistent and densely sociable cultures of childhood, as tangible technologies for interaction and intimacy that traced out bonds and tethered friends together in joint activity. I follow kids’ earbud cables as they diagram networks of social affinity, finding that sharing earbuds was not simply a diagnostic of “friendship”: it was a constitutive practice of sociality through which kids could contest and negotiate their relationships.

These portable music practices were incorporated into the existing ecology of school communication that divided classroom regulation and rationalization of language, talk, and noise from the chaotic, playful, and ideologically unstructured interactions of children’s communication among peers during “free” time or surreptitiously during class—a framework that I discuss in chapter 1 in terms of instrumental and intimate communication frames. Shared earbuds served functions similar to such canonical and ongoing practices as whispering, passing notes, or coordinating visits to the bathroom—channels of communication and interaction where kids cultivated intimate connections with one another in spaces intentionally closed to adults. Often listening served less to emphasize particular music than to forge connections in the background of group conversations or other activities. Shared earbuds were an open connection, a link, what Lori Custodero calls “being-with” (2005) or what Alfred Schutz calls “the experience of the ‘We’” ([1951] 1977:115)—not
unlike the passed notes I regularly witnessed, which as often as not simply represented back-channel cues, confirming connections within the flattened social space of the classroom: “what’s up,” “hey,” “how’re you,” “isn’t this stupid?” “what are you doing at recess,” “I need to talk to you later,” etc. Tucked snugly in clothes and ears, and tangling among complex links of affinity and status, MP3 players and earbuds were an important element of an interactive repertoire that privileged the materiality and intimacy of sociable communication (figure 1).

Figure 1—Sharing earbuds

29 I credit danah boyd for articulating the connections between practices like passing notes or whispering and children’s mobile media use on her blog, *apophenia* (2008a). boyd’s comment concerns cell phone text messaging, but sharing earbuds at HCS seemed to activate the same private, intimate, and playful frames as whispered or passed communication.
On the first day of school in 2007 I returned to HCS after several years’ absence, this time not as the one-day-a-week music teacher, but as a full-time ethnographer. I was new to childhood research, and I did not have very specific ideas about what sorts of practices I would find, but I hoped that in the bustling spaces of this little elementary and middle school I would find some insights into how popular music media found purchase and meaning in face-to-face social environments.

The morning started out uncomfortably. Before school began, kids had been excitedly reconnecting with friends in the gym, and I hovered awkwardly, trying to introduce myself to kids who could not seem to care less. And sitting in on classes that morning I felt like an intruder, making teachers’ already difficult first hours even more difficult with my explained but not entirely understood presence. HCS had two morning recesses, an early recess for the elementary students (kindergarten to fourth grade), and a later one for middle school (fifth to eighth grades). During the middle-school recess boys would split into groups to explore the edge of the woods or play football or soccer. A few girls would join the sports, some would wander in small groups, and many would sit and stand at the swingset behind the classrooms—repurposing the swings as a gathering spot, in clear contrast to their active use as swings during the elementary recess.

On this first day of school, eighth-graders Amber and Daisy sat side by side on adjacent swings, and their classmates Alice and seventh-grader Kathy stood in front of them, talking in a circle. I remembered Kathy from years earlier when I taught her as a second grader, but the other girls were new since my time at HCS. From a distance I saw Amber handling an iPod in her lap, so I headed toward the swings to start my research in earnest and see how
they were using the music device. I said hi to Kathy as I approached the group to introduce myself. She remembered me, and blushed a bit as she recalled the drawing she had given me in second grade, a rough rendering of me labeled “the best music teacher ever.” That drawing had meant a lot to me then, and Kathy blushed again when I told her I still had it. As Kathy welcomed me and introduced me to her friends, I noticed that Amber had one of her iPod’s earbuds in her left ear, and the other earbud was resting in Daisy’s ear, its cable stretched across the eighteen inches between the swings. They told me they were listening to Evanescence, a song called “Lithium.”

I was impressed that they so easily shared the earbuds even as they swayed back and forth, and I asked if they would ever listen together and swing at the same time. (I did not realize yet that actually swinging on the swings was usually limited to the younger children.) They took my question as a challenge, and Daisy turned to Amber with a mischievous look as they started pumping their legs, almost hitting Kathy and Alice, who scrambled out of the way. As they swung higher and higher they laughed and cheered each other on, coordinating their leg pumps to stay connected by the precariously balanced iPod earbuds in their ears. They swung together like that until they couldn’t go any higher, and the earbud only finally dropped out of Daisy’s ear when they tried to slow down from the peak of their swing. When they came to a stop Daisy looked at me, pleased and defiant: “See?”

“iPod culture” and “audile technique”: Scholarly narratives of sonic fragmentation

Scholarship about portable music devices, from the Sony Walkman to Apple’s iPod, but also boomboxes, transistor radios, and car stereos, often focuses on the relationships between
“public” and “private” that are blurred or destabilized by the mobility and boundary-crossings afforded by these devices. In Doing Cultural Studies, Paul du Gay et al. remark that “while there has been a steady move away from mainly public to predominantly private modes of viewing and listening, the Walkman marks an important inversion of this process by taking private listening into the public domain” (1997:114). Alexander Weheliye, in a discussion of the boundaries of public and private that are crossed by noise and music, writes that “the Walkman encountered massive hostility because it supposedly enabled users to ‘cut themselves off’ from their immediate environment . . . While earlier itinerant technologies, boomboxes for instance, were scrutinized because they subjected ‘innocent bystanders’ to high decibels of ‘noise,’ the ‘silent’ Walkman was ironically taken to task for its ‘antisociality’” (2005:135). In a recent popular audience discussion of the appropriateness of electronics as gifts for young children, psychologist Kathy Hirsh-Pasek reflects the same anxiety about MP3 players as greeted the Walkman, telling the Philadelphia Inquirer that, “Music is great, and it builds listening skills . . . But if a five-year-old is walking around with [earphones] all the time, you’re tuning out. You’re missing out" (Quinn 2008). In Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience, Michael Bull provides a wealth of interview and survey data that support Hirsch-Pasek’s anxious identification of an intense anti-sociality that characterizes iPod users. He writes that “iPods are by their very nature primarily a privatizing technology,” which “giv[e] greater prominence to media generated forms of privacy whilst distancing users from the ‘proximity’ of others” (2008:7). In Bull’s framework, the iPod is the “first cultural icon of the twenty-first century” (2008:1). It builds on the cultural movement of private listening practices into public spaces identified by du
Gay et al., representing an extreme “individualization” of culture, an increasing experience of “mediated isolation.”

Ironically, du Gay et al. point out that the Sony Walkman was originally designed with two headphone jacks, because “it would be considered rude or discourteous for one person to listen to music alone” (1997:58)—which, as Weheliye points out, it certainly was. After consumer research showed that Walkman users were not using the second jack, and instead were listening in more personal, private ways, a follow-up version was introduced with just one jack. Many MP3 players today come with two jacks, but I never witnessed any HCS students using both at once. Students were not interested in plugging in to one device with separate headsets.

Rather than desiring even more personal, private modes of listening, as Sony identified among early Walkman users, HCS students’ preference for sharing earbuds suggested a rejection of the central logic represented by what Jonathan Sterne calls “headset culture” (2003). Sterne identifies headsets, which preceded loudspeakers as the listening devices packaged with early phonographs and radios, as central in the development and diffusion of “audile technique,” a process of idealizing hearing and privatizing space that led to “the subsequent commodification and collectivization of individuated listening” (2003:155). While such collective listening refers most obviously to the mass audiences of broadcast

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30 Bull’s book is about iPods and their iconic cultural status specifically, but he points out that his conclusions about listening are applicable to other portable music devices. Since my concerns are not directly with the iconic status of the iPod, but with listening practices and earbuds, I engage with Bull’s discussion with the assumption that “MP3 player” means effectively the same thing as “iPod.” That said, I should note that many of the students at HCS refused to categorize iPods as a subset of MP3 players, demanding instead that they were decidedly different categories of device. Nonetheless, their peculiar taxonomy seemed to have no effect on how they used the items. In any event, this chapter is not about taxonomies or brands (interesting as those topics are), it is about earbuds, so I set these issues aside.
radio, Sterne identifies several early practices where individuals in immediate proximity to one another would listen “alone together” (a term he borrows from Kenney 1999), such as sharing the ear tubes of early parlor phonographs, families’ collective listening to one radio on several headsets, and classes for telegraph operators in which students would each wear headphones as they worked on the same lesson. Sterne notes that even once families transitioned from headsets to loudspeakers, the techniques of individual, private, immersive, and detail-oriented listening would remain: “their shared auditory experience is based on a prior segmentation of sound space into auditory private property” (2003:165). Bull’s historicization of iPod culture suggests a linear continuation of this history of audile technique laid out by Sterne. Bull identifies the intensely individual, immersive, and private mobile music practices of iPod culture as “hyper post-Fordism” — an extreme manifestation of postmodern fragmentation and mobility, which extends the “inversion” of privatized listening mentioned by du Gay et al., which itself brought Sterne’s privatized sonic spaces into the public.

Kids’ listening practices at HCS call into question the universality of a narrative of fragmentation and privatization that sees loudspeakers reduced to headsets and multiple headphone jacks pared down to one per device. HCS students’ headset practices made use of the portability and intimacy afforded by headphones, but they cracked open headphones’ “hermetically sealed soundscape” (Bull 2008:29) to include one another in their listening. Their innovative technosocial configuration involved listening to music with one ear, while being open to talk or interaction with the co-listener and others with the other ear. Listening

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31 Fordism → post-Fordism → hyper post-Fordism
was *layered* within talk, touch, gesture, and other interaction. Rather than collective listening being a way to rationalize and control noise, as Sterne describes, shared portable listening represented *one more channel* of sound in an already densely noisy and chaotic social order. Kids at HCS rarely listened with both ears, and were therefore constantly attuned to the potential for interaction with those around them, so it would not make sense to say that they could be “interrupted,” as Bull documents in London adults’ “interpersonal strategies” with iPods (2008:54). Instead, they continually passed earbuds among their friends and freely talked over the music they listened to—a “while-doing-something-else” ethos of media technology (Fujimoto 2005). While some MP3 players now come with two jacks, like the original Walkman, and students at HCS even owned a couple of these multi-jack devices, I never witnessed any HCS students using two headsets at once. Because it would cover up both ears, listening this way would have precluded talk and interaction among the pair of listeners and their proximate friends. With one ear free, kids’ soundscapes were certainly not sealed, and being plugged in together was necessarily a different experience from listening in isolation.

Still, in some respects the privacy of headphones outlined by Bull and others was important to HCS students’ listening. It was not that kids exploded the privatized sound spaces of headphones to broadcast their music to everyone. Rather, they cracked open the intimate listening environment of their earbuds to share with just one other person. Such inclusion, therefore, depended on some of the same logics of exclusion and isolation described by these theorists of portable music. At HCS earbud cables traced out intimate, close connections between pairs of individuals in groups as a constitutive ingredient of the

Sharing earbuds appears to be a common practice among child and youth listeners in the U.S. It is rarely addressed explicitly, but when it does come up it tends to be framed negatively or anxiously. Most often it elicits hygienic concerns that sharing earbuds may also entail sharing fluids, dirt, or germs. At HCS I never witnessed any discourses of cleanliness or attention to hygiene by kids engaged in sharing or by concerned adults, but issues of hygiene seem to represent the great preponderance of Internet mentions of earbud-sharing. The apparent irrelevance of these matters to my informants leaves me with little to say about them, but I note as a suggestion that concerns about dirt, filth, hygiene, disease, invasion, penetration, etc.—especially when directed toward children and youth—are prominent tropes in discourses of transgression, abjection, and “matter out of place” (Stallybrass and White 1986; Kristeva 1982; Douglas [1966] 2005) through which moral panics are classically produced (Cohen [1972] 1987). Here the appeal to hygiene seems to deploy such tropes as part of a generalized stance of disapproval and concern toward kids’ peer practices.

Very occasionally sharing earbuds is mentioned in passing in scholarly literature on portable media (e.g., O’Hara, Slayden, and Vorbau 2007:862; Tanaka, Valadon, and Berger 2007:35), but its social implications are largely ignored, and sharing seems to be understood as a haphazard, ad hoc, or deficient listening practice. A rare exception comes from Apple CEO Steve Jobs, who suggested in a 2006 Newsweek interview that sharing iPod earbuds was a much more practical, immediate, and easy method for sharing music than the wireless file-transfer function of the Zune, Microsoft’s competitor device. Jobs tells his
interviewer, “I’ve seen the demonstrations on the Internet about how you can find another person using a Zune and give them a song they can play three times. It takes forever. By the time you've gone through all that, the girl’s got up and left! You’re much better off to take one of your earbuds out and put it in her ear. Then you’re connected with about two feet of headphone cable” (Levy 2006). By contrast, Hewlett-Packard researchers O’Hara, Slayden, and Vorbau characterize sharing earbuds as “difficult”: “Sharing the audio on some devices was also difficult. For example, with the iPod there is no internal loudspeaker available, so people would use one headphone earbud each or cup the earbuds in their hands to try and amplify it or simply not bother with the sound at all” (2007:862). Jobs’s view that passing over an earbud is much simpler than establishing a wireless connection between devices certainly corresponds closely with the actual listening practices I observed among kids at HCS. The scenario he describes, of a male teenager trying to impress a girl, emphasizes the familiarity and physical closeness of adolescent courtship, a youthful and intimate social field (and thus not unlike the friendships of younger children) in which anxieties about hygiene or degraded listening would not seem relevant to participants.

“Digital natives” and Internet sociality

By contrast to discourses of headset isolation, MP3 players in their capacity as “new media” are embedded in a technological and cultural field that scholars increasingly understand in terms of public sociality and participation. Digital music devices are regularly positioned as symbols of a generational gulf separating adults from youthful “digital natives” (Thornham and McFarlane 2010). John Palfrey and Urs Gasser claim the iPod and its iconic
earbuds as markers of an entire generation when they characterize the subjects of their book *Born Digital* as “those who wear the earbuds of an iPod on the subway to their first job, not those of us who still remember how to operate a Sony Walkman” (2008:4). Kathryn Montgomery similarly lists “a host of wireless devices and digital products—from video games to cell phones to iPods” before stating that “never before has a generation been so defined in the public mind by its relationship to technology” (2007:2). Unfortunately, despite their early invocations of the iconic iPod, these studies and others—such as the remarkable (and huge) collaborative study of “digital youth” led by Mizuko Ito (Ito et al. 2009)—do not follow up their introductory remarks with any direct analysis of young people’s actual uses of portable music devices specifically (though Montgomery at least gives some space to the politics of music downloading and RIAA lawsuits), preferring instead to examine how young people use the connective affordances (Hutchby 2001) of the Internet and wireless communications devices.32

Instead, discourses about children and new media focus on wireless communication and the Internet, and frequently look at mobile phones in particular, identifying text messaging and instant messaging as prominent features of digital youth cultures. As I point out in the Introduction, HCS students were interested in and desired cell phones, but were limited by

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32 In this chapter and throughout I use the term “affordances” in the sense that it is used in the sociology of technology, to emphasize the complex relationships between material technologies and their social contexts. The term is part of an intervention that seeks a middle ground between technologically determinist views in which the material properties of technologies, independent of their social contexts, are seen as wholly responsible for the activities those technologies are used for, and a social constructionist rejection of any constraining or enabling potential inherent in the actual form of technologies or objects, in favor of unlimited interpretive possibilities depending on social context. The “affordances” view de-emphasizes both “essential” characteristics and discursive representations of technologies, in favor of “questions of the use-in-situated-social-interaction of technological devices (Hutchby 2003:582). Insofar as I am interested in children’s uses of earbuds and MP3 players for unexpected social purposes that are still deeply attentive to the actual form of those devices, “affordances” is the appropriate term. For an overview of these issues, see the debate between Ian Hutchby and Brian Rappert in *Sociology* (Hutchby 2001, 2003; Rappert 2003).
their age, the expense of the devices, and the geographical isolation of their community. Instead, MP3 players were far and away the most widely used media devices at school. While new media studies of youth largely ignore them, I argue below that kids used MP3 players in ways that reflected some of the emerging finding about social interactions in other digital media, though not in the ways we might expect.

Discussions of MP3 players as new media foreground connections to the Internet and users’ practices of sorting, selecting, and sharing songs in playlists, emphasizing the intertextual, rather than interpersonal, affordances of portable music devices (B. Brown and Sellen 2006). Portable music device users can share playlists online, download cheap and pirated music easily, and transport large amounts of music with them on portable devices. Bull sees iPods linking listeners to commercial networks of musical circulation and distribution as a “‘tethering’ technology” (2008:50)—cables tether listeners to devices and through them to the culture industries. While their connection to the Internet suggests a particular orientation toward what social media scholar danah boyd calls “networked publics” (2008c), as noted above their actual uses away from the computer are seen by many to be almost anti-social. Notably du Guy et al. and Bull alike focus on the ability of users to customize song lists through cassette tape mixes or iPod playlists, so it might not be appropriate to view file- and playlist-sharing practices as particularly “new,” or uniquely characteristic of digital music devices.

But HCS students only occasionally downloaded songs from services such as iTunes or from questionably legal peer-to-peer networks using software like Limewire. In most cases their music was purchased on CDs at discount stores like Walmart. They did share music
with one another, but this usually meant an older sibling creating a CD compilation or transferring songs to a younger sibling’s MP3 player, simply swapping music devices with one another when a friend would like to hear a certain song, or recording music by setting an earbud from one device against the microphone of another. Though a few students owned expensive (and prestigious) iPods or Zunes, most had much cheaper devices by Samsung, Sony, Ilo (a Walmart brand), and Craig (sold in convenience stores and pharmacies), among others. Ironically some of these cheaper devices were more likely to have extras like the built-in microphones that kids found useful. While their music devices could hold many songs (even relatively inexpensive devices had 512MB of storage, which would store a hundred or more songs), with only a few exceptions kids’ devices had songs numbering in the dozens rather than the hundreds. With so few songs, these children did not construct playlists for themselves or for friends; they scrolled through their players’ songlists to find one song after another in lists full of misspelled and incomplete metadata.

The scale of these portable music practices was far from the vast Web 2.0 repositories of instantly accessible tagged and linked songs that commentators emphasize as characterizing music in a digital era. Rather, with the small number of songs, the relative portability, the importance of physical stores, and face-to-face sharing, HCS kids used MP3 players on a smaller scale, much the way they might use portable CD or cassette players. MP3 players were preferable to older technologies for immediate and practical reasons: they were smaller than CD players and, for the most part, hardier. They fit in pockets and would not skip when jarred—necessary traits for objects constantly handled, squeezed, tugged, and tangled in

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33 A surprising and notable activity. I discuss this mode of transferring music from one device to another in the next chapter.
children’s active and sociable school lives. Kids largely ignored the particular social and connective affordances of MP3 players’ links to stationary computer terminals and the Internet in favor of the social and connective affordances of earbuds’ links between physically proximate friends.

So while the Internet played a role in how students at HCS consumed music, the more important market development, in terms of the social practices of music listening at HCS, would be the increased prevalence of earbuds rather than headsets that began to be widely packaged with personal music devices in the 1990s. Without a headband holding the two speakers together, earbuds moved freely from one person’s ear to another’s. Just as white earbuds visually mark the iPod in advertising, by 2007 earbuds (white, black, many colors of neon) had become iconic of youth in southern Vermont—a hooded sweatshirt and an earbud in one ear marked an adolescent stance in a way that a letterman jacket and cigarette might have in an earlier generation.

It is ironic that for the most part the social uses of MP3 players are acknowledged in contexts where physically separate individuals link to one another over the Internet at stationary computer terminals, but the interactive uses of MP3 players among physically proximate people are largely neglected, or even denied.34 Despite the general independence from the Internet of HCS kids’ uses of MP3 players, they nonetheless reflected related forms of mediated connectivity between real-world intimates. Thus Ito’s description of the mobile Internet in Japan as “a snug and intimate technosocial tethering, a personal device supporting

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34 Even in a volume titled Consuming Music Together (O’Hara and Brown 2006), which includes chapters with titles like “Sharing and Listening to Music” (B. Brown and Sellen 2006) and “Investigating the Culture of Mobile Listening” (Bull 2006), sharing earbuds or listening together to maxed-out headphones are entirely absent.
communications that are a constant, lightweight, and mundane presence in everyday life” (2005a:1) would apply nicely to the social embeddedness of MP3 players in HCS students’ peer culture—with the caveat that the connections drawn by MP3 players were not wireless and distant, but wired and face-to-face. Studies of youth, new media, and wireless communication repeatedly find that young people use digital technologies to connect with family and friends that they know from face-to-face settings (Ito et al. 2009; boyd 2008b; Hijazi-Omari and Ribak 2008; Lenhart et al. 2007; Palfrey et al. 2008). At HCS it was not kids’ Internet practices, but the embeddedness of their listening practices within a broader ecology of expression and communication, that made their use of portable media devices notably sociable and interactive. Rather than text messaging on cell phones, the most prominent form of mediated connection involved the cables of headphones. Earbud cables traced out bonds between friends while excluding others, and they tethered individuals together in joint activity. At HCS the short cables between earbuds encouraged and even enforced physical proximity and engagement.

Finally, to say that kids put music devices to sociable use is not necessarily to celebrate that they have somehow escaped from problematic configurations of contemporary life. Kids’ social organization and media consumption are certainly engaged in regimes of power, which I outline below. But it is necessary to recognize the diversity of practices that characterize the contemporary media landscape, to note that the powerful forces structuring media and the senses are not monolithic or universal. Even with the North American consumer environment the portable music player market is diversifying to account for children’s unique approaches to consumption. Off-brand devices have become increasingly
affordable and available, and marketers increasingly target kids with celebrity-branded MP3 players and innovations like Hasbro’s iDog series of portable speakers and MP3 players with multiple headphones jacks (a miss, as I point out above, but which clearly targets kids’ social listening practices). In general, children are seen by product marketers as an increasingly (exponentially) profitable and growing demographic of music consumers, and the market seems to be shifting to accommodate and cultivate modes of music consumption valued by schoolkids, perhaps also disrupting some of the master narratives of privatization and isolation that are bound up with urban adult iPod culture and audile technique.

Social connection

At HCS, earbud-sharing practices varied along parameters of age and gender. Kids began to have their own devices around third grade, as their interest in popular music developed and families allocated more resources to maturing children. All students were willing to share earbuds in certain contexts, and while sharing was most prominent among girls it was not uncommon at all among boys, many of whom were avid music listeners. On balance boys’ attention was occupied a bit more by portable video game devices (girls also owned them), so in some settings where girls would invariably be found listening together, boys might instead huddle around a Nintendo DS.35 Only the older boys in seventh and eighth grade seemed at all reluctant to share earbuds. The emotional and affective charge of physical intimacy

35 A recent study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart et al. 2008) shows that 94 percent of U.S. girls play video games, compared to 99 percent of boys, problematizing now-common assumptions about a gender divide in gaming and pointing to the ascendance of gaming as a nearly universal cultural phenomenon among youth in this country, which conforms to my observations. Still, the Pew study points out that boys and girls do tend to play different types of games, in different social environments, and for different amounts of time. It may be that girls’ relatively heightened interest in music listening contributes to the gendered differentiation of video-game practices.
articulated by shared listening could be uncomfortably construed as feminine or childish, and did not comport with the adolescent, heteronormative masculinities they cultivated (Pascoe 2007; Redman et al. 2002). But even thirteen-year-old boys were not above the occasional intimacies, and I sometimes found them listening with an especially close friend or with a girl classmate—using earbuds to cut across the always-charged gender boundaries in search of a comfortable way of sharing space with a girl.

In some instances, joint listening involved providing access to MP3 players to those who otherwise lacked them, as in the example of Amber and Daisy on the swings at the beginning of this chapter, in which Amber shared her music with friends Daisy who did not have their own devices. But the motivation of social connectivity seemed even more powerful, as I noted when such sharing practices continued, and even increased, after the Christmas of 2007 (a watershed for personal music player ownership at Heartsboro), after which a majority kid in third grade and up owned a portable music device of some sort. I was surprised to find that the headphone-sharing practices I observed in the fall continued despite this new saturation of MP3 players. Kids would listen together to a single device, leaving players dormant in pockets, rather than each listening on their own, to their own music on their own device.

This impulse for interaction and connection seemed to trump even mutual interest in music as the motivation for shared listening. Much of kids’ musical tastes overlapped with their friends, but preferences for marked genres like country or metal seemed correlated more with family affiliations than peer groups, and friends frankly acknowledged their musical differences. I noted a couple of instances where a discussion about shared taste in music led girls who did not consider each other friends to share a pair of earbuds, but even more often I
observed friends with different tastes listening together even though one of them didn’t really care for the music being played. For the most part, however, kids knew enough about their friends’ tastes to silently switch the song to a consensus track when handing over the second earbud. The music playing was generally in the background of kids’ attention, which they focused on one another. Further, I never saw listeners coordinating their movements musically, by dancing or timing their steps to the beat of the music, and they rarely sang along to the music while sharing earbuds. That is not to say that children never listen carefully to music; they certainly do, as Jennifer Woodruff shows in her recent dissertation (2009), which includes several compelling examples of girls attending closely to the details of recorded music in order to coordinate their movements and dance synchronously. Rather, my point is that the particular practice of sharing earbuds seemed to foreground social contingencies other than music.

Listening together was so important that at times it eroded individual boundaries of ownership and property, as kids’ without earbuds tinkered with or even dismantled their headsets to share with one another. Fourth-grader Dave’s hand-me-down MP3 player had battered old adjustable headphones that had lost their foam covering, which made them particularly uncomfortable to listen to with frozen ears outside at recess in the winter—no matter to these Vermont kids. His best friend Brian did not have a portable music device, but he talked constantly about his interest in “rap” music. Normally these two would pass Dave’s MP3 player from one to the other; when Dave was not listening, he would let Brian listen if he wanted. Sometimes on their way out to recess, if Brian noticed Dave was not bringing his player, he would ask if he could listen to it, and Dave would usually agree. But passing the
device back and forth was limiting, so one morning as they sat down together with their breakfast trays, Brian took Dave’s headphones without asking, pulled them to their maximum size, and wiggled one of the speakers until it snapped permanently off its headband. Dave nodded approvingly. Brian passed the headband with its remaining speaker to Dave, who put it over his head. Brian held the newly detached speaker to his own ear, and the two boys listened to Snoop Dogg as they ate their English muffins.

In a social environment where Brian might feel impunity to destructively dismantle his close friend’s device without asking permission, it is necessary to consider what we mean by “sharing.” Ownership itself was an unstable, contested, and often disregarded notion at school, and sharing often exceeded the simple act of allowing another to use one’s “own” property. So deeply ingrained in the construction of friendship bonds, kids’ ethos of listening together problematized the very logics of property and privacy that “sharing” assumes.

**Sharing earbuds in a group: earbuds trace out relative affinity (Amber, Alice, Daisy, and Kathy)**

Dyadic sharing between best friends was not exclusive. Eighth-graders’ Amber and Alice’s extremely close friendship was built upon shared media use: watching Disney Channel shows, social networking on Bebo and YouTube, emailing and IMing family, friends, and (they say) celebrities, and listening, together, to music. Even very close friends like Amber and Alice had other friendships, and earbud cables traced out these weaker bonds as well. At the beginning of the year Amber and Alice were the core of a group that also included Kathy and Daisy. These four hung out together during lunch and free time—for
instance, sitting on the swings at recess, as I first encountered them. This group fractured over time, but Amber and Alice remained a stable pair.

Amber and Alice spent as much time as possible after school and on weekends at one another’s houses. Kathy was a bit of a third wheel to their pair. She joined them for sleepovers and was a full member of the group, but it was clear that Amber and Alice were committed to each other in a way that did not fully include her. Daisy was a bit of a misfit. She got in trouble with her teachers constantly, and she did not spend much of her time outside of school with her school friends, preferring to meet friends from neighboring towns. This group was constituted partly out of necessity; the other group of seventh- and eighth-grade girls was exclusive and “cool,” unwelcoming to outsiders other than two boys they would let sit with them at lunch. The only obvious delimiter of the high-status girls (who Amber and Alice termed the “girl posse”) was that they had all spent their entire school careers at HCS, while Amber, Alice, and Daisy had enrolled in the last couple of years. Kathy was the exception to this rule, but she had spent the previous year in conflict with seventh-grader Betty, one of the “girl posse,” and clearly felt unwelcome in Betty’s company.

Amber and Alice’s friendship centered on the Disney Channel. It would not be an exaggeration to say that they talked about very little besides Hannah Montana, the Jonas Brothers, and especially Dylan and Cole Sprouse—the stars of the hit Disney Channel show, *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody*. Kathy joined wholeheartedly in this Disney obsession, but Daisy had no interest in it, and she was self-confident enough not to feel a need to feign interest in Disney Channel media to be accepted by Amber and Alice. The high-status girls,
on the other hand, professed to hate the Disney Channel products, and would have nothing to do with them.

In the spring Kathy and Betty had a rapprochement of sorts, and Kathy began to float between groups. At the same time, she began to publicly forswear the Jonas Brothers, which had become a shibboleth of affinity with Amber and Alice. Daisy also detached somewhat from Amber and Alice as the year progressed, and she spent more time one-on-one with some of the high-status girls. But rather than floating from one group to another, she became an entity to herself. She lived down the road from Melissa, a sixth grader with similar taste in music and fashion—they both liked dark, almost goth, clothes—and over the year she and Melissa developed a sort of mutual respect and friendship.

Until Christmas, Amber had this group’s only MP3 player, and she shared it freely. But the connections traced out by the headphone cables did not always represent equivalent social bonds. Alice was so close with Amber that sharing was simply assumed, and they had enough trust that Alice never minded if Amber shared with someone else. Kathy would often reach out and grab the earbuds when Amber took out her iPod. One day in March, for instance, Amber took out her iPod at lunch when she could not remember the name of a band—she wanted to complain that her cousin did not like them. She unwound the cable to expose the screen, and Kathy, sitting next to her, immediately reached out and took an earbud, even though Amber had not put on any music and did not seem to intend to play music. Amber left her iPod on the table as she bussed her lunch tray, and Kathy picked it up and started a song. When Amber returned, she took the other earbud and listened along with Kathy, while Alice took out her own MP3 player (Amber’s back-up Samsung), and listened
with one ear. Kathy had her own MP3 player—she had also received one for Christmas—so reaching for Amber’s iPod, rather than taking out her own, suggested a desire to listen jointly, and perhaps it suggested also the value that accrued to the iPod in particular as a consumer icon. Alice was certainly not put out that her best friend would listen with Kathy. Such practices were common, and this was the sort of situation where it made sense to burn some of her batteries.

Unlike Kathy, who would reach for the iPod, Daisy, for the most part, would wait for Amber to offer. Daisy never owned an MP3 player, and never expressed a desire for one. She lived alone with her dad, and they had no such luxuries. But sharing with Daisy was not charity. Daisy was tough, independent, and often touchy, and the other girls’ lives were very tame compared to hers. When Amber and Daisy listened together on the swings in September, they listened to Evanescence, one of Daisy’s favorites, and not, say, Hannah Montana or Ashley Tisdale (another Disney act), which Amber might have listened to with Alice or Kathy in those months. Listening together with Daisy was a way of reinforcing a sometimes tenuous bond, such that Amber and Daisy were authenticating one another in their sometimes awkward friendship. Conversely, Kathy’s listening almost always suggested her effort to strengthen a bond with Amber, and even to crowd in on Alice’s best friend status, rather than an expression of mutual respect or encouragement.

Amber and Alice’s group could be seen as part of an even larger group that included the sixth grade girls, who also had very little contact with the high-status girls. At lunch the high-status kids sat at the end of one table, sometimes with two boys they tolerated, and often with an adult that they tolerated. Amber, Alice, Kathy, and Daisy would sit with the sixth-grade
girls at another table. They would talk and throw food with the sixth graders, but they would share earbuds, for the most part, with one another. At breakfast in October, Alice, Daisy, and Kathy sat with Melissa and Kelly, sixth-graders and friends (Kelly is Alice’s sister), catching up on homework for the coming day of classes. None of these girls had MP3 players, so they talked as they worked. Ten minutes before class Amber and Becky, another sixth-grader, arrived carrying their MP3 players. Becky handed an earbud to Kelly, sitting on the bench. Amber sat down next to Daisy, both straddling the bench at the lunch table and facing each other. She passed Daisy an earbud, and they listened together and talked.

From across the table Melissa quietly asked, “what kind of MP3 player is that?” But Amber and Daisy didn’t hear her question—their earbuds were in the ears facing the table, and they couldn’t hear her. Melissa leaned over the table, closer, and said again, “Amber?” But Amber still didn’t hear her. Melissa gave up, and leaned back and sat quietly. She was good friends with these two, and would have been welcomed into their conversation, but she was also two grades younger and did not seem comfortable raising her voice to get their attention, interrupting them. It was not intentional, but the earbuds had the effect of excluding Melissa from conversation.

**Across gender boundaries**

As mentioned earlier, older boys were frequently unwilling to share earbuds, though sometimes they found it appropriate to share with girls. Instances of cross-gender sharing that I witnessed tended to occur in groups, and rarely between “couples.” Various forms of courtship were common among the fifth- through eighth-graders, but they tended not to be
highly visible at school, which favored more homosocial groupings of friends and made cross-gender pairings awkward. Kids who were “dating” would often pass notes to one another, sit together on the bus home, and meet (or at least ostentatiously schedule meetings) outside of school. Insofar as earbuds outlined most other affinity relationships, it would be unsurprising if sharing earbuds coincided with holding hands or similar practices. Due to the details of my research protocol and agreements with adults in the community, I avoided active investigation of kids’ dating, courtship, or sexuality, so I lack significant data on this topic.

Comfort with girls or boys was a marker of status, or “maturity” perhaps, so earbud sharing across genders was most likely to occur among the high status kids. Eighth-graders Michelle, Sarah, and Erica and seventh-graders Jenn and Betty were the “high status” girls—the “cool” or “popular” kids, except that the school was too small and those words too disputed for them to be widely acknowledged in those terms. They had known each other all their lives, and they shared earbuds in ways similar to Amber and Alice’s group. But they did not have a core dyad, best friends around whom the others orbited. Though the strength of their individual bonds shifted throughout the year (and despite a few moments of dramatic conflict), they were a strong and cohesive group. These girls were competitive and challenging with each other and with outsiders, so like almost everyone else at HCS I steered clear of this group, who would often erupt with “ewwww!” and “go away!” if I approached. Unlike the group around Amber and Alice, these girls had much more interaction with their male classmates. Two boys, eighth-grader Jack and seventh-grader Sam, would often join them at lunch or hang out with them after school. The following episode suggests how
earbuds circulated among this group—grabbed and passed and negotiated—and were layered among talk and occasionally even shared with boys, across a gender boundary that was otherwise rather stable. At lunch in October the high-status seventh and eighth graders sat with Jack and me. Jack and the girls had all known one another their whole lives, but his regular presence as a boy in their group created tension that was not necessarily undesirable. In this episode negotiation over the Erica’s iPod became an opportunity for a verbal interaction between Sarah and Jack, who was otherwise silent and awkward, which then shifted into listening together to Michelle’s device. This encounter was charged with flirtatious tension and competition that was partly mediated by shared listening and the circulation of earbuds.

Michelle and Sarah sat across from each other, listening to Michelle’s MP3 player as they ate. Betty sat at the head of the table, listening to Erica’s green iPod nano with matching green earbuds. Jack was quiet. Erica demanded her iPod back from Betty, who handed it over. Jack reached for the iPod, and Erica tried to stop him, but Sarah told her, “he’s not going to do anything to it.”

Jack took the device but he could not turn it on. Erica snatched it back from him, turned off the “hold” button, and handed it back with a sneer.

Sarah said, “I don't know how to turn it on either, but I will when I get one for Christmas!”

Jack browsed the songs, “I don’t know any of the songs you guys have here.”

Noting the exceptional size of Erica’s music collection, Sarah said, “She’s got like five hundred or something. Are you going to look at them all?”
“I’m just looking for ‘Hell’s Bells.’”

I asked, “what’s that?”

“It’s just a sweet song.”

“Who’s it by?”

“AC/DC.”

Michelle jumped in, “Oh, I have AC/DC. Maybe I have it.”

Sarah was holding Michelle’s player and tried to browse for the song. She couldn’t figure it out, and made another comment about not knowing how to work them, “but I’m getting one for Christmas!”

Michelle took the device and fiddled a bit. She handed one earbud to Jack and the other to Sarah. “Is that it?”

“No.”

Michelle tried another song. “That?”

“No.”

Michelle played a couple more songs for Jack and Sarah, none of which Jack recognized as “Hell’s Bells.”

The MP3 player’s role in this dynamic was to facilitate interactions that between Jack and the girls when Jack was otherwise a quiet non-participant in the lunchtime conversation. Its presence gave Jack an opening to join the group action, which shifted to the sort of challenging, competitive dynamic that characterized the boy-girl talk among this group: Erica sneered at Jack’s lack of knowledge about the “hold” button, Sarah tried to argue for his inclusion by pointing out her own ignorance, and Michelle’s attempt to find the song Jack
wanted shifted Erica’s competitive frame to one of cooperation and accommodation. Cutting across the gender boundary here, the earbud cable created a context for connection, interaction, and competition.

**Other modes of listening**

Even when not directly sharing the earpieces, kids used their headphones in ways that drew out connections among them. Sometimes kids would turn the volume of their earbuds all the way up, until their music could be heard, fuzzy and distorted, from a few feet away. They would use them this way as miniature speakers, resting on a table or dangling like grapes over a shoulder. This setup selected a small number of people out of larger social contexts and grouped them as listeners, a variation on the way sharing earbuds connected two people within larger groups. In Art Class the teacher would often put on music for the class to listen to, as a strategy for controlling the sound environment and encouraging students to work quietly and not make their own noise. The small class of nine students in eighth grade allowed for more flexibility, but the different friendship groups—one composed of the three boys and two with three girls each—could rarely agree on music to listen to as a class. In the face of such standoffs, sometimes one of the girls would take out her MP3 player and set it on her group’s table with its earbuds, turning the volume up so that the earbuds acted as miniature speakers—just loud enough that her group could listen to the music they wanted, without being such a distraction for the others that the teacher might find reason to object.36

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36 Managing social space through inclusion or exclusion in the listenership of speakers recalls the similar, if inverted, phenomenon of portable stereos (“boomboxes”) in public spaces. With boomboxes, though, sound from portable speakers “spills over” into others’ listening environments (Boyer 2009; Weheliye 2005),
This practice was so common that kids would complain about earbuds that were not loud enough to be used this way.

**Stratification and exclusion**

As MP3 players and earbuds were charged with the intimacy and intensity of kids’ friendships, they worked accordingly to exclude non-listeners, acting almost as physical barriers visibly showcasing social affiliations and highlighting separation. One fall day while the middle-school boys played half-court soccer during recess (the oldest of them complaining that there were too many players crowding the field), Amber and Kathy walked right into the middle of the game, listening together to Amber’s iPod. Intently oblivious to the action around them, they stopped, talking, listening, and completely ignoring the boys who loudly complained at the obstruction—the girls’ private interaction dramatically intruding on the public activities of the schoolyard. Such “walking around”—a canonical practice of middle-school girls—“draws attention to those who do it, by contrasting with the fast movements of their peers, with play, with the larger groups engaged in games, and with the louder tone of children’s talk” (Eckert 1996:184). Conventionally such “walking around” conversations between girls involve gossip about boys; Eckert points out how the prominent display of such “private” conversations stands out as a central practice in the production of a pre-adolescent public sphere that is canonically located on the schoolyard and in semi-public spaces like shopping malls (1996:185). The visibility and physical intimacy of shared earbuds reinforced these established practices, linking private (but not solitary) listening to aggressively pushing the boundaries of individual space. With earbuds used as speakers, social inclusion and exclusion can be managed much more precisely.
youthful gossip and heterosexual disaggregation as a constitutive activity of differentiation in
the broader social life of school. Amber and Kathy’s “accidental” wandering right into the
middle of a soccer game—their shared earbuds and turned-in stances broadcasting their
insensibility to the action around them—prominently performed the status and privilege
claimed by older girls.

Using earbuds as speakers could serve an isolating function too. On a hike after school
one day in the fall I tried to walk beside Michelle, an eighth-grade girl who did not seem to
want to be there. Her mom and younger sister were on the hike, so she had to be too. Up and
down the trail, a pair of seventh grade boys chattered about spies and ninjas as they
investigated pools of water, a group of younger girls struggled to make it up the steep hill,
and a handful of parents chatted about work and their kids. Michelle walked by herself, and
the earbuds to her MP3 player hung like grapes over her shoulder, blasting fuzzy Top 40
songs. At this point in the year I had not yet been able to get Michelle or any of her friends to
share more than a sentence with me—usually they just shouted at me to go away, because
early on I told them I would if they ever asked. I caught up to Michelle and tried to make
small talk, figuring that without her circle of girlfriends she might be more open. She
muttered one-syllable responses to my questions. I heard a Lilly Allen song and got excited
because I knew it; but Michelle claimed not to know who Lilly Allen was, and her gruff
responses made it very clear that she did not wish to continue the conversation. After a few
uncomfortable minutes I left Michelle alone. The whisper of her music traveled through the
quiet Vermont woods, and the rest of us knew to leave her be.
Another afternoon in the fall classmates Holly (in third grade) and Mary (in fourth grade) waited for their parents to come pick them up after school, sitting side by side on a table in the gym, their backs leaning against the wall. They talked a bit, until Mary took out her MP3 player, put the headset on over both ears, and fiddled with the player to find a song. After a minute Holly asked her what she was listening to. Mary replied, too loudly because her ears were covered, “that ‘to the left’ song,” and sang, “to the left to the left” (this was the hook to a song by R&B singer Beyoncé that was popular at the time). Holly responded by singing the line back, “to the left.” Mary handed the headphones over to Holly, but took them back after a quick moment. Holly told Mary, as she put her headphones back on, “You should get earbuds, you know the ones you put in your ear instead of over your head.” With this headset, only one person could listen at a time. Nodding dismissively, Mary explained, too loudly again, that she once had that kind, but they broke, and she got these from her CD player. Holly replied that the earbuds are usually cheaper. Mary said that her older brother was getting a new MP3 player for Christmas and when he did she’d get his earbuds. And with that she quieted, and listened alone; the two girls sat in silence. Mary never acknowledged that earbuds are good for sharing. And while she initially passed her headset over to Holly—she certainly did not snub her—her explanation authoritatively shut down Holly’s attempt at interaction. Mary seemed happy to settle in to listening alone, rather than to share with a younger girl with whom she had at best an awkward relationship—especially because Mary was actively concerned to cultivate friendships with the fifth- and sixth-grade girls, so she did not have very much time for her younger classmates.
Thus conspicuous visibility of earbuds as a marker of social connection made shared listening a potential site for negotiating status or lobbying for access to a friendship group. A particularly visible interaction among the four fifth-grade boys revealed the negotiations that sometimes occurred over who would share earbuds with whom. Johnny was not very well adapted to the social rigors of middle school, though he tried really hard to fit in with the three other boys in his grade. They were fast friends with one another, and tolerated Johnny, never mean but never really welcoming, either. Johnny had picked up on their interest in rap music early in the year, noticing that sometimes they would listen in pairs to the flashy red MP3 player of their most affluent member. Johnny had a portable CD player that he brought to school, usually with Eagles or Fleetwood Mac CDs borrowed from his dad. One morning as these boys were shooting baskets, Johnny took his CD player out of his bag and announced that he had a new Eminem CD. The other boys ignored him, like they usually did. But Johnny was persistent and, holding one of his earbuds out to Ted, walked into the crowded basketball key, saying, “Listen to this, Ted.” Ted tolerated Johnny, but he was not about to be stuck sharing a set of earbuds with him, so he retreated. Johnny advanced, and Ted retreated, and then turned on his heels and ran to his other classmates. Johnny ran after, arm held out, saying “listen to my new CD!” Unable to catch Ted, he turned his attention to Freddy, who also demurred, but Johnny pressed on, and this time chased Freddy across the gym. Johnny continued to chase his classmates across the crowded basketball court, cornering them against the wall until they would sneak under his outstretched arm and run away again, for several minutes, until it was time to go to class. The other boys gasped, half laughing, “stop Johnny, leave us alone!” But he pressed on. It became a game, but a game
based on an underlying asymmetry: sharing earbuds is an intimate act, and however much they liked Eminem or tolerated Johnny, he definitely was not someone with whom they were willing to share such a connection, at least not in so public a place. And for Johnny, who spent a lot of time and effort trying to be more than just tolerated by his classmates, this was a plea for exactly the sort of intimate social linkage that they were committed to refusing him.

Examples like this were uncommon, and the potential for exclusivity of sharing earbuds rarely came to the surface. Moments of dispute were rare, because the conventions were tacit. Johnny understood how consumer media products worked within his classmate’s social hierarchies, which is why he pushed so hard to convince them to share earbuds with him. But he may not have understood his own otherwise unstated status in the hierarchy, which was exposed by this “breach” (Garfinkel 1967). In general, kids knew their social status implicitly, so when they brought media to bear in efforts to change their status they tried to avoid drawing criticism or sanction.

On the other hand, some kids simply knew not to try to share. For instance, Dan was the only sixth-grade boy. He got along okay with the fifth-grade boys, but was not especially close with them. And he wanted to be friends with the seventh- and eighth-grade kids, but they were generally unwelcoming, and often mean. Still, he always had someone to sit with at lunch—usually his fifth-grade classmates, though toward the end of the year he started sitting with the seventh- and eighth-graders who shared an interest in video games. One day in the fall I filled in at the last minute as a substitute teacher for the fifth- and sixth-grade class. As the kids returned from gym for math class, Becky and Kelly were sharing
headphones, and kept them on as they sat down—testing my limits. Seeing them, Dan quickly asked, “if they get to listen to music, can I go get my CD player?”

I suggested we might listen to music as a class while they worked on their assignments. We talked as a class about what we would listen to and eventually, after a lot of haggling, agreed on Miley Cyrus. Kelly said, “that’s what we were listening to already.”

Dan was the lone holdout, and refused any of the suggestions (whereas Melissa was not happy with the Disney Channel choices, but eventually agreed to Miley). So I let him listen to his CD player. He had over-ear headphones, and wore them as he slouched over his desk, listening to heavy metal as the rest of us listened to Miley Cyrus. At one point Dan sang to himself, under his breath, and Kelly turned around to tell him to shut up. I encouraged her to focus on her own work.

Otherwise Dan did not often listen to music at school. He brought his CD player to and from school mostly to use in the car during the drive. Dan did not share earbuds in part because he did not have anyone to share with. Demographic chance had determined that Heartsboro would only have one boy his age, and unlike for the older boys, sharing with girls was not an option in sixth grade. So Dan was a special case, but his case also helps set the difference between older and younger boys into relief. Across the chasm of sixth-grade, younger boys participated in technology sharing practices just as the girls did, while older boys did not.

So only a few boys listened alone, but none of the older boys listened with one another. Most simply did not listen to music devices at school, avoiding a practice that acquired gendered connotations among the older students. Of the seventh- and eighth-grade boys,
several told me that they simply had no interest in listening to music. They would much rather play video games. Jack and Sam had music devices, but rarely brought them out during school. Jimmy had a Zune that he would sometimes watch *Family Guy* episodes on in the mornings as he waited for his friends to arrive. On a few occasions Jimmy’s friend Zack borrowed the Zune and watched TV shows on it during lunch—using both earphones and shutting himself out of the other boys’ conversation. Jimmy was widely known by his nickname, “Spaz,” and was near the bottom of the totem pole of the seventh- and eight-grade guys. And Zack was perhaps even lower in the hierarchy. Unlike Dan, both boys were full members of the social groups they participated in, but within those groups their role was to bear the brunt of the constant joking, hazing, gay-baiting, insult-filled talk that characterized the boys’ group interactions. Neither Jimmy or Zack told me explicitly that they listened alone because they were tired of being hazed by their friends. But among all the students at HCS only a few boys who were also the subject of constant hazing listened alone, which again suggests the ways kids used headphone cables usefully diagrammed their relationships with one another.

**Children pull audile technique inside out**

In all of their shared listening practices, HCS kids subordinated adult values about sound and sociality to their own pragmatic interests in the social configuration of their listening. The MP3 format, for instance, represents a intentional balance between quality and portability, along with particular ideas about acoustical perception (Sterne 2006), but the values implicit in these trade-offs were largely irrelevant to HCS students. Listening with one
ear to stereo MP3 recordings—mixed with different left and right channels—meant losing as much as half the signal, but students did not seem to mind or to notice. Using cheap consumer earbuds at volumes loud enough to be heard around a table meant creating a lot of distortion—inverting standard ideals of quality in headphones, where expensive sets cancel out noise and seal out external sounds so that the speakers do not compete with outside noise and cannot be heard by others.

Needless to say, it would not occur to most adults to use earbuds in this way. I was regularly surprised to observe and learn about these practices, which at times shocked my own sensibilities about music, technology, and fidelity. But that might be the point: such practices were simply outside the musical epistemologies normally associated with the Internet, new media, MP3 players, and adult music consumption. Even in cases where HCS kids were ignorant of or uninitiated into mainstream values around fidelity or stereo, it would be wrong to identify deficiencies, when their practices so clearly responded to an identifiable, if alternate, system of values and embodied techniques of listening. For kids at HCS to use earbuds as an interpersonal technology for interaction, rather than as a medium for listening to music abstracted by layers of entextualization, recording, and commodification, depended on a very particular conception of the intimate social and physical affordances of earbuds, which turned “audile technique” on its head.

But that is not to say that they threw out “technique” altogether. While audile technique presents itself as an orientation toward sonic detail, as Sterne argues the careful listening it lays claim to also produces and depends upon on particular orderings and stratifications of listeners from one another. I find a useful comparison to HCS kids’ earbud practices in
Sterne’s description of the early stethoscope (2003), which instrumentalized and rationalized sound as a tool of medicine, isolating and positioning sound precisely in space (and in bodies). Physically and pragmatically homologous to Sterne’s stethoscope, earbuds too bounded and located discrete sounds precisely among children’s constantly moving social networks. But the task they accomplished pulled the stethoscope’s mediations inside out: at HCS earbuds were oriented outward, toward listeners rather than from sites of production—placing sounds into social space, like a flashlight or projector, rather than receiving it from some otherwise inaccessible source (inside the body, esoterically written into the grooves of recording media, across time and space to an original acoustic event). The cultural logic of audile technique, which attends carefully to the sources and characteristics of privatized sound as part of a technosocial imaginary that has mediation and the desire for a distant original at its center (Peters 1999), was largely moot here. Instead mediation and circulation were assumed, naturalized, and backgrounded, so rather than the final node in a chain of production, distribution, and (mobile) consumption, MP3 players at HCS were the starting point in a chain of technosocial mediations that embedded music, sound, and listening in the material fabric of children’s interpersonal and institutional lives.37 Earbuds deployed listening as an intimate practice in the nooks and crannies of kids’ social lives at school.

37 Cf. Novak (2008:15–16): “Listening is not the final link in a chain of musical transmission, but the very crucible of musical innovation.”
Chapter 4

Tinkering and Tethering: MP3 Players and Children’s Material Culture

In this chapter, I consider MP3 players at HCS from a “material culture” perspective. This approach reveals that children emphasized the tangibility of their MP3 players as objects more than as devices for communication or data storage. At HCS music devices were ever-present throughout the school day, slipped into pockets, threaded under clothing, and handled until worn. When friends shared earbuds to listen together, the cables tethered them ear-to-ear, and they delighted in the bodily challenge of moving in tandem with earbuds balanced delicately between. Kids tinkered constantly with their MP3 players, decorating them with decals, markers, tape, and nail polish, trading unsalvageable ones to save for spare parts, and seeking out charged batteries, in a never ending process of “enlivening” (Skuse 2005; Appadurai 1986) their fragile devices. When they broke, as they often did, kids repaired them or lived with malfunctions. Stories about failed devices were told enthusiastically, and the reasons for their failure were often shrouded in mystery. In these ways, I argue, children’s MP3 players have been thoroughly domesticated within an intimate and “childish” material culture already characterized by playful physical interaction and portable objects such as toys, trading cards, and dolls that can be shared, manipulated, and held close. Children’s emphasis and interest in the materiality of the devices as objects also informed their conceptions of sound, music, and circulation, as they treated circulating songs as resonating sound rather than digital files and swapped songs with each other using the earbuds of one person’s device to record through the microphone of another’s.
Childish things: technology, music, and children’s material culture

Media and communication technologies can seem radically disconnected from the material world of bodies, places, and objects. Hence, common narratives about portable music devices see private listening practices intruding upon and fragmenting public spaces, increasingly partitioning individuals within personalized musical soundscapes that detach listeners from their surroundings (Bull 2008; du Gay et al. 1997). Michael Bull argues that users of MP3 players “construct fantasies and maintain feelings of security precisely by not interacting with others of the environment” (2005:350). This non-interaction snowballs into an almost transcendent experience of separation and isolation from space and surroundings: “as users become immersed in their mobile media sound bubbles, so those spaces they habitually pass through in their daily lives may increasingly lose significance for them and progressively turn into the ‘non-spaces’ of daily lives which they try, through those self same technologies, to transcend” (2005:353). This way of thinking about mobile music builds on an understanding of sound as a uniquely immaterial medium; thus listening is easily seen to become unlinked from its setting. To the extent that such narratives understand portable music listening to involve communication or interaction, it is separated from the immediate act of listening, and instead occurs across vast distances online, by sharing files or playlists, or tagging and rating songs. Anxious or nostalgic narratives of the spread of MP3 players emphasize the disappearance of physical recordings—LPs or CDs and their cover art—and regret the intangibility of digital files (Boyer 2007).

Challenging this view, recent scholarship argues for understanding new media specifically in terms of “materiality”— recognizing the unmistakable fact of embodied users
interfacing with devices (Munster 2006) and the importance of face-to-face social networks in their use and significance (Miller 2010). Phillip Vannini points out that in a fundamental sense technology and material culture are inseparably tied up with one another: that “technology is about doing, knowing, and using objects and . . . materiality is about the character of those objects or things” (2009:1). In reference to children, this perspective seems especially salient, as children’s own understanding of the meaning and role of new media music devices in their lives seemed to focus especially on the material characteristics and physical utility of such technology. We might even see children’s material practices appear as a more relevant context for understanding their adoption of particular music technologies than their “musical culture,” in the sense of the music they make or listen to, though my position here is that children’s musical culture is itself inextricably tied up in existing forms of children’s material culture.

This requires an assertion that there is such a thing as “children’s material culture.” It seems to me that there is, and that the category of “childish” things has real salience in the lives of children and adults. Children’s movements are restricted to “islands” set off for them by adults (Gillis 2008), whether playgrounds (Kozlovsky 2008), stores or departments of stores (Cook 2003), even media genres (Banet-Weiser 2007; Bickford 2008) and restricted Internet sites (Montgomery 2007). Within such islands, kids have relative freedom; for instance, the movements of kids’ bodies in the playground—vertical and horizontal, swinging and climbing, running and crawling—contrast markedly from the restriction and regulation of movement in classrooms. This freedom of movement and activity within
confined spaces is often understood in terms of “play”—an activity ideologically associated with children and childhood (Sutton-Smith 1997).

Play, of course, is associated with a particular class of things—toys—and the link between play as an activity and toys as objects helps to define the broad outlines of children’s spaces and children’s things, as, for instance, in drawing boundaries around children’s role as consumers (Cross 1997; Fleming 1996; Kline 1993; Sutton-Smith 1986). Children and adults articulate sophisticated taxonomies of “childish” things, as anthropologist Stephanie Melton finds in children’s categorization of “kids’ foods,” the boundaries of which are marked by complex intersections of healthfulness, color, packaging, processing, size, and ability to be handled and played with (2010).

Sharon Brookshaw points out that it can be difficult to distinguish the material culture of children from materials made for children (2009). In making this distinction, Brookshaw calls attention to “makeshift” toys that are “designed, made, named, remodeled, used, and reused solely by children; they represent the creativity and imagination of children and the way in which almost anything can be adapted for their amusement or entertainment” (2009:369). At HCS, for example, school supplies like masking tape, pencils, and paper clips became the substance for creative and never-ending creation, especially of medieval weapons like grappling hooks and ball-and-chains. So rather than distinguishing categorically between objects for and objects made by children, I would argue that the potential of an object for manipulation and activity, and its capacity to be repurposed for children’s use may be a diagnostic of potential childishness. Melton, for instance, describes an 11-year-old girl “boxing” a pear as though it were a speed-bag, and possibilities for such playful uses suggest
why fresh, but not cooked, fruits and vegetables were classified as “kids’ food” by the children in her study.

Studies of musical toys produced for children suggest that music, too, needs to be materialized in bright colors, physical manipulability, and interactive potential to be suitably childish. Patricia Shehan Campbell describes the complex overlapping of visual and sonic stimuli in a large urban toy store, in which electronic sounds are integral (and intentionally designed) elements of the colorful and interactive commercial world of toys (1998). Multicolored and rocking-horse-themed instruments, singing dolls and dinosaurs, and even nonmusical toys that inspire or elicit musicking and movement from children all point toward deep connections between music, movement, and objects in children’s culture. Similarly, in a study of the everyday home lives of young children in seven countries by Susan Young and Julia Gillen, electronic toys that make music appear to be incredibly common, and children’s everyday activities include dancing to child-themed CDs and vocalizing along with music-making pinball toys (2007). Young writes that, “in contemporary media, music is interwoven with images, animations, texts, spoken words and sound effects, and these extend into the material items of musical toys and other equipment” (2008:43).38

On the surface, MP3 players seem not to share in this “childish” potential of objects. They are small, yes, sometimes brightly colored, and increasingly they are marketed to children using recognizable visual cues: I have seen Hannah Montana-themed devices and Lego devices with removable pieces, and the toy company Hasbro has had success selling its iDog series of animal-shaped plastic speakers. But this remains an emerging market. At HCS

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38 Music, here, appears to take its place in a broader phenomenon of “convergence” in children’s culture, such as that pointed out by Goldstein, Buckingham, and Brougère among toys, games, and media (2004).
there were only two iDogs and none of the thematically decorated devices. Most of the MP3 players children had were monochrome, many black or grey, a few red, purple, or blue. The cheaper versions most students owned were lightweight, plastic, and uninteresting to look at; as objects they seem designed to disappear, to subsume themselves into the sort of transcendent, “non-space” listening Bull describes (2005). But nonetheless children constantly saw in their MP3 players the childish potential for exactly the sort of manipulability, interactivity, and movement that characterizes the rest of their material culture, reimagining them not in terms of transcendent freedom from bodies, spaces, and sociality, but as intimate and tangible anchors to their material, embodied, and spatial surroundings, and especially to one another.39 In this they amply demonstrate Daniel Miller’s point that “possessions often remain profound and usually the closer our relationships are with objects, the closer our relationships are with people” (2008:1).

**New media devices as childish things**

How portable media like MP3 players have been understood in terms of spatial practices and materiality points to some important contradictions, which help reveal the importance of “childishness” in consumer and technology practices. Discussing mobile Internet devices in Japan—or *keitai*, a term translated roughly as “something you carry with you” (Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda 2005:1)—Ito emphasizes “attention to and immersion in the physical environment and social order” (2005a:13) as a central characteristic of portable media practices. This framing contrasts noticeably with Michael Bull’s characterization of iPod

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practices as “non-interactive in the sense that users construct fantasies and maintain feelings of security precisely by not interacting with others of the environment” (2005:350). By contrast, for keitai users, Ito argues that such a “domain of ‘cyberian apartness’ from everyday physical reality . . . has always been a site of tension and integration between the demands of face-to-face encounters and footwork and the demands of the remotely present encounter and visual attention to the handheld screen” (2005a:13).

By this point it should be clear that through sharing earbuds, HCS children’s relationship to their surroundings was much more engaged than what Bull describes. But why this is the case requires a deeper understanding. Ito positions mobile Internet practices as part of a broader trend in consumer culture toward “media mixes,” the “increasingly pervasive mass-media ecologies that integrate in-home media such as television and game consoles, location-based media such as cinema and special events, and portable media such as trading cards and handheld games” (2007:100). She writes that, “while the Internet has taken center stage in our theorizing of new forms of communication and relationality, media mixes in children’s content, below the radar of mainstream adult society, have been quietly radicalizing a new generation’s relationship to culture and social life” (2007:100). Ito critiques the idea that “PC-based broadband is the current apex of Internet access models,” pointing instead to the Japanese emphasis on the mobile Internet accessed through handheld devices, especially mobile phones: “ubiquity, portability, and lightweight engagement form an alternative constellation of ‘advanced’ Internet access characteristics that stand in marked contrast to complex functionality and stationary immersive engagement” (2005a:6). While talking on mobile phones, as with listening to portable music devices, is often seen as a private intrusion
of public spaces, mobile Internet practices are, as Ito say, “a snug and intimate technosocial tethering” (2005:1) that creates connections, rather than excluding them.

Key, here, is Ito’s framing of media mixes and the intimate connections of *keitai* not in terms of some unique affordance of mobile technologies, but as characteristic of a particular consumer culture linked to *childhood*, which is made up of “Tamagotchi, Game Boys, Pokémon cards, and *keitai* [that] are intimate, personal, and often cute media technologies scoring high on both Japanese cultural distinctiveness and global appeal” (2005:2).40 Tamagotchi and Game Boys, like *keitai*, are portable digital media devices, and the Pokémon brand appears in Game Boy games and various other digital media, and this varied and pervasive media ecology “enable[s] lightweight imaginative sharing between people going about their everyday business (2007:93). Ito points to the characteristic “cuteness” of this consumer culture (Allison 2004) and the strong connections of all of these forms to children and youth media: Pokémon and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* trading cards and Tamagotchi are marketed specifically to children, and Game Boys and mobile Internet phones are strongly associated with youth culture, even as they are widely used by adults. On the whole in Japan portable media ecology links “childhood, remix, and revaluation cultures . . . with specific phantasmagoric cultural arenas rather than with digital technology per se. Also, importantly, these cultures are more strongly associated with . . . children and working-class youth (2007:105–6). So at least in the Japanese context we can see how mobile media practices that

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40 Tamagotchi are “virtual pets”—handheld consumer devices with which users feed and care for a cartoon animal (see Bloch and Lemish 1999; Allison 2006). Pokémon and the Game Boy are both international brands produced by Nintendo. Game Boys are portable video game devices; Pokémon is a collection of cartoon characters and storylines that appear in video games, TV shows, movies, and, centrally, trading cards (Tobin 2004).
are embedded in the materiality and sociality of intimate face-to-face interactions build on existing childish cultures of consumption and play. Of course products like Pokémon and Game Boys marketed by the Japanese media giant Nintendo have long-term appeal to children in the U.S., and mobile communication practices—especially text messaging—are increasingly associated with children, as the pervasive discourse of “digital natives” makes very clear (Thornham and McFarlane 2010).

Mobile Internet devices like smart phones, of course, are different from MP3 players, and since Ito does not locate portable listening in the cultural fields she outlines, we must ask where music fits in children’s consumer culture. The apparently hermetic seal of a pair of earbuds suggests starkly different affordances from the small screen and keypad of a mobile phone. It might not be unreasonable to posit sound as a uniquely privatizing medium, such that mobile listening is necessarily much more isolated than other mobile media practices like *keitai*. The historical connections between rationalized sound and privatized space drawn by Sterne and confirmed by Bull and others cannot be easily dismissed. In fact, Bull’s conclusions about music devices are confirmed across a much broader sample by a comparative study (also by Ito) of portable technology in London, Los Angeles, and Tokyo. Ito found that adult commuters in each city use music listening as a means of “cocooning” in crowded public transit or traffic (2008). But HCS kids’ practices suggest that sound is not a medium uniquely susceptible to privatization, and by focusing on the material practices of kids’ uses of MP3 players, I argue here that the key difference is childhood: whatever normative adult associate portable sound to private space, children’s listening fits much more
naturally among other childish consumer practices. And we can see this point born out precisely in children’s sound practices, to which I turn at the end of this chapter.

**Tethering**

Alan Prout writes that children’s bodies “are inseparable from, produced in, represented by, and performed through their connections with other material objects” (2000:2). This point was prominently demonstrated by kids’ uses of MP3 players at HCS, as objects that were constantly present attached to kids’ bodies. A prominent example was sixth-grader Melissa, who got a purple iPod Shuffle for Easter along with a matching pair of squishy purple earbuds. Melissa wore jeans and a baggy sweatshirt to school almost everyday, and after she got the iPod it remained clipped to her sweatshirt all the time, except when teachers made her put it away during class (even then it would remain close, in a pocket). She kept it on even after school during the hockey program she attended, clipped to her sweatshirt with one earbud in her ear, the other dangling. The cables tossed around and kept getting tangled in hockey sticks, but even though the coach and I repeatedly asked if she might want to put the device away while she was playing, she always declined. She kept it on even when the batteries died and she couldn’t listen to music. Eighth-grader Amber, too, often kept an earbud in her ear even when not listening to music, and kids would keep their MP3 players on their bodies during school, rather than storing them in their bag or lockers. When they entered the classroom the devices would disappear into pockets and sleeves, snug and close, ready to reappear immediately upon leaving class.
Sharing earbuds between friends also foregrounded material links among kids’ bodies, to the extent that it was often difficult to get kids to find anything to say about sharing earbuds, as grounded as they were in the tacit intimacy of their embodied sociability. When I asked them about their preferred types of headphones, they nearly always told me they preferred earbuds, but the reasons they gave tended to be along lines of, “The other ones are too bulky,” “They’re ugly,” or “I wear earrings, so they kind of rub—it hurts.” When I asked specifically about sharing earbuds, for the most part kids answered that they would listen together because one person did not have theirs with them, or in order not to waste expensive batteries. These answers were ad hoc, developed on the spot in response to my questions. Otherwise sharing earbuds for the most part went undiscussed among kids. They did not seem to have any ready repertoire of talk about sharing earbuds, and they would rarely ask for or verbally offer an earbud to share, preferring to hand them over quietly, or while talking about something else.

Amber and Alice also gave me these same pat answers about earrings, batteries, and ugly big headphones, but when I encouraged them to explain sharing earbuds, Amber’s response suggested how sharing earbuds activated kids’ bodies as bodies, linking them through a physical cable that needed to be carefully balanced in their ears and accounted for as they moved together. When I asked Amber and Alice about sharing earbuds, Amber said, “we just started sharing, and then we’d listen to it and walk around.” Remembering, her face lit up in a smile, and she said, “we got really good at, like, opening doors with us both wearing them, and going through them.” Alice nodded in enthusiastic agreement, and Amber continued, “that should be a new sport!” Alice nodded again, “yeah, yeah!” and it was clear that this
idea had come up before. Both girls were proud of their skill at working together to accomplish what they recognized as a delicate and athletic task, and they happily remembered their early experiences working through the shared challenge of walking and listening together—not unlike the spectacular feat of physicality and coordination that Amber and Daisy accomplished sharing earbuds on the swings on the first day of school. In each of these cases earbuds were activated to facilitate a task whose challenge was not musical at all, but lay rather in the careful coordination of bodies in integrated motion.

A couple weeks later I saw a pair of younger girls gamely working out the problem Amber and Alice had pointed to, trying to walk through doors connected by earbuds. The morning back from Easter break, third-grader Dahlia and her second-grade friend Katie came into the school entryway after dropping their bags off at their lockers, on their way to the gym to wait for school to start. They slowly opened the heavy double doors and carefully stepped through one at a time, a bit off balance, leaning in toward each other while connected ear-to-ear by the earbuds of the purple iPod Shuffle Dahlia carried in her hand.

Seeing me Dahlia exclaimed, “Bicky, I got an iPod for Easter!”41 Lifting her head to call over to me she almost lost her earbud, so she lowered her head in to Katie’s and said, with more restraint, “this is a . . . ‘Shuffle.’” The pair shuffled past into the gym, Katie off balance in her loose platform-heel sandals but still steadying her head as she leaned in toward Dahlia.

These moments where girls swung together athletically or struggled to walk through doors sharing earbuds reveal earbud-sharing as a skill that was actively negotiated, practiced, and honed. Despite the familiarity and facility with which kids passed earbuds around their

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41 At HCS I was variously known as Tyler, Mr. Bickford, Bicky, Icky Vicky, and Kyle.
friendship groups, these practices were learned and perfected, though whether they were passed down or repeatedly innovated is difficult to determine. On the one hand, we might see Dahlia and Katie’s shuffle as “interpretive reproduction”—Corsaro’s (1992) term for children acting out scripts with each other that they observe among adults (or in this case older students)—as though they were trying out earbud practices commonly witnessed among older kids like Amber and Alice. But Amber and Alice themselves had to figure out how to walk together while sharing earbuds, without apparently learning from even older acquaintances. Whatever the provenance of these activities, it is clear that kids at a range of ages understood earbuds as essentially participatory technologies presenting particular physical and social challenges as they worked out how to incorporate mobile listening into their singularly important friendships. The goal of sharing quickly entails a challenge of embodied coordination and an opportunity to move together, strengthening the affective and unspoken bonds of kids’ friendships.

Approaching kids’ listening as a physical challenge brings to mind Sterne’s treatment of mediated listening in terms of Maussian “techniques” (Sterne 2003:91–92; Mauss 1979), as a sensory and technological practice that implicates the body and physical learning. Comparing the skillful techniques involved in HCS children’s sharing earbuds with Sterne’s audile technique reveals how distinct HCS kids’ embodied listening practices were from the normative regimes of listening and technology outlined by Sterne, Bull, and du Gay et al. In both cases listening ordered and organized bodies, but whereas audile technique specifically involved separating people from one another—whether headsets partitioning individual space in middle-class dwellings or stethoscopes separating doctors from unclean, lower-class, or
female patients (2003:114)—sharing earbuds at HCS intimately linked individuals with a demand of physical proximity and careful coordination with another body in motion.

**Breaking**

Like a lot of objects sold to children, the generic MP3 players that most of the HCS kids had were cheap, even disposable. Devices regularly broke or were lost, and kids’ use of them demonstrated that “material practice revolves around loss more often than preservation—luster fades, things fall apart” (Colloredo-Mansfield 2003:246). The $40 or $50 that even the least expensive devices cost was significant enough that kids lived with partially broken devices, scrounged around for replacement parts, and tried to repair cracked cases or wires when they could. And though they were aware of the possibility that the devices would break, they were not careful at all with their devices, keeping them around during active play or sports, and carelessly setting them down where they might forget them. Cranking the volume up to use their earbuds as miniature speakers, they often blew out headsets.

Though they worried about breakage, they also related stories about broken devices with bravado, revealing how “people stake prestige . . . on the techniques and materials of consumption and destruction” (Colloredo-Mansfield 2003:252). Sixth-grader Dan, for instance, told me, “I have [an MP3 player], but it’s broken. I can’t download songs onto it. I don’t have the cable, and I think it has a CD that you need. I got it from my cousin [eight-grader Erica], and she’s stupid. I think she lost the CD.” Dan never did get a working MP3 player during the year, and instead he used his portable CD player. But he also never got rid of his cousin’s hand-me-down device, even carrying it to and from school in his backpack,
and its presence provided a relished opportunity to complain about his older cousin’s ineptness in losing the data cable and software disk.

On another occasion, I sat with seventh- and eight-graders Kathy, Alice, and Amber at breakfast, listening to Jordan Sparks and Taylor Swift on Kathy’s iDog. The dog bobbed its head in time to the music, and disco lights flashed on its face. The girls’ conversation revealed the delight taken in stories about the failure of devices, and also the detailed knowledge these friends had about one another’s devices. I asked Kathy if she was happy with the MP3 player she got for Christmas. She nodded, but my question prompted Alice to complain, “my MP3 player’s being retarded.”

Kathy elaborated for her, “it doesn’t turn on.”

I asked, “still? Did you try resetting it or whatever?”

Amber jumped in, incredulous: “it doesn’t have a reset button!”

Alice said, “my dad, literally, went and picked it up, like this, and went—” she mimed dropping the device, “like that, on the floor [to try to get it to work]. And I did it too! And it won’t turn on. I’ve had it for two weeks, and it’s already broken.”

Alice and her sister Megan, in sixth grade, had matching MP3 players. I asked Alice, “your sister’s works fine?”

Amber replied for her, “yeah, except she blew her earphones,” and then she bragged, “I’ve blown two pairs of earphones!”

“How do you do that?”

“It goes too loud and it overblows.”

“When you turn up the volume to use them as speakers?”
“No, just as earphones.”

“Do you put them real loud in your ear?”

Amber nodded. Alice joined in, “I told Megan not to have hers up cause she’s gonna blow them. And she’s using my headphones.” Since Megan’s earbuds were broken, and Alice’s device would not turn on, the sisters had consolidated their equipment.

Amber bragged, “I’ve blown my earphones, my iPod earphones, and my MP3 player earphones. And I traded my mom my dad’s earphones—he gave them to me—for my mom’s iPod earphones. So I had those, and hers are about to blow, so now I got these, so I have a second pair, my moms. I blow up earphones very easily,” she said with evident pride.

The discussion made Kathy nervous. She pointed to her new iDog and asked, “these could never blow up, right? Could these ever blow up?” Amber and I tried to assure her that the lightweight plastic device should be fine.

Several weeks later the story of the broken device had developed into a comic routine between Alice and Amber, with a mysterious malfunction providing the narrative lead-up to a ready punchline.

During an interview with both girls, Alice remembered, “I got a sucky MP3 player but—”

Amber whispered, “it broke!”

“—it wound up breaking! It broke the first week I got it! Cause, what it was, I had the earphone in my ear, and I had the MP3 in my pocket. What was so weird was that the headphone fell out of my ear and I tried turning it back on and it didn’t work after that. After the earphone fell. I didn’t even drop it.”
Amber asked, apparently for my benefit, “where’d you get it?”

“A pharmacy,” Alice laughed. “CVS.”

Amber grinned and delivered the punchline she had set up: “Yeah, don’t buy electric things at a pharmacy.”

**Enlivening**

As these stories reveal, breaking and loss did not end the social lives of these objects, but were rather the impetus for particular “enlivening” practices in which kids continually worked to maintain and enhance their devices’ social utility. Enlivenment “is normatively equated both with the appropriation of commodities, but also with a more mundane practice of maintenance, in the sense that certain commodities such as portable radios require a continual economic investment in the purchase of batteries if they are to remain enlivened in the socio-semantic sense” (Skuse 2005:124–25; also Appadurai 1986). Enlivenment, therefore, continually resists entropy or dispossession, the failure, disposal, or transience of objects (Lucas 2002). When Alice’s and Megan’s two device had different failures, the sisters consolidated them and shared. Amber found a seemingly inexhaustible supply of headphones in possession of her family members, and she saw her task as cajoling them into sharing or trading. Dan would later ask me for the USB cable his hand-me-down MP3 player needed to work, and we tried connecting it to one of the school computers, even though he still lacked the necessary software CD. Sometimes students would even break their devices on purpose, as when fourth graders Dave and Brian aggressively snapped one earpiece off of an old pair of headband-style earphones, so they could each listen to one speaker at the same
time. Just as the failure of Alice’s device was transformed into an occasion for shared storytelling with Amber, in Dave and Brian’s case enlivenment, and increased sociality, is the direct result of destruction, manifesting Colloredo-Mansfield’s suggestion that “exhausting commodities frequently opens up channels of connectivity, yet it also reduces individual control of them” (2003:251).

Batteries, which Skuse points to in a very different context, were central to HCS kids’ enlivenment of music devices. Economizing battery power was often mentioned as a reason to share the earbuds to one device between friends. Amber and Alice knew every detail of one another’s battery usage, because batteries affected how and when they could listen together. They talked about how they navigated different rules at home and the differences between their devices to listen together as much as possible. Amber told me that one of the reasons she and Alice listened together was because “I charge [my iPod] every day, and she likes to save her battery. I listen to mine a lot, so I have to charge it every day.”

Alice agreed, “cause I’m limited to so many batteries. My mom bought me a four-pack of batteries. And then I find batteries around the house.”

“My battery,” Amber continued, “as much as I listen to it, could last me about an hour or two. A full battery.”

“My battery can last me two, three weeks.”

“Cause she barely listens to hers, and I listen to mine a lot, like every day.”

Alice’s Samsung took a single AA battery, while Amber’s iPod had an internal battery that was easily charged at an outlet at home—without the need for any cash or purchase from her parents. While her dependence on batteries severely limited Alice’s ability to use her
device, she and Amber collaborated to avoid Alice’s device ever going completely dead. That the girls had such minute knowledge testifies to their closeness and to the important role of these devices as mediators of the girls’ friendship. In fact, the MP3 player that Alice had to scrounge batteries for was actually Amber’s old Samsung, a device she had before she got her iPod. Alice received this device on indefinite loan from Amber after the player she got at Christmas had broken. So while Amber phrased her explanation in terms of her own frequent listening habits, her ability to listen more than Alice was also structured by her parents’ willingness to buy her an iPod and the particular affordances of that device’s rechargeable battery. But at school Alice probably listened to music as much as Amber, because Amber would always automatically pass her the second earbud when she took out her iPod.

**Tinkering**

In addition to such attentive social mediations of battery power, the transience of these devices was tied up in practices of tinkering, repair, and decoration—activities that seemed in most cases to go together—as though the material instability of MP3 players opened up possibilities for kids to interact with them in new ways. Their “cheapness,” in this sense, could be seen as a source of constant renewal and interest.

Like Alice, who emphasized the mysterious circumstances of her MP3 player’s failure, seventh grader Randy told me that his old earbuds “just melted! I felt some heat on my arm,” he said, “and I looked down, and they were melting up!”

I asked, “really? Just for no reason?”
“Yeah, really! So I tore them apart to see what’s inside.” Randy pulled them out of his bag to show me (figure 2)—he carried even such irreparably damaged items around in his bag, reconstituting them as objects for investigation rather than as deconstituted “trash” (Lucas 2002).

Figure 2—Randy tore apart his “melted” earbuds to see what's inside

Randy told me he got his current pair from the airplane on his family’s recent trip to Disneyland. But unlike his old ones, these weren’t marked “L” and “R” for left and right. So he showed me how he would listen to Trace Atkins’s “Honky Tonk Badonkadonk” to figure out which ear is which—the song starts with, “left, left, left right left,” with “left” and “right” panned to alternating channels. Then he went into the office to get a bandaid that he could rip up to mark the earbuds so he wouldn’t have to keep checking them with the recording. But he couldn’t rip the bandaid by hand, “because it’s thicker than the ones I use at home.” Instead he pulled a sheet of decals out of his Game Boy case and wrapped a confederate flag sticker
around the left earbud. He marked the decal with an “L,” using a Sharpie he also pulled out of his Game Boy case, and said with satisfaction, “That’s a good redneck way to do it” (figure 3).42

![Image of a Game Boy Micro with headphones and a Confederate flag sticker](image)

Figure 3—“A good redneck way to do it”
Randy marked the left earbud with a Confederate flag sticker.

Like MP3 players, portable gaming devices were also subject to such decoration, as, for instance, eighth-grader Nate cut strips of electrical tape to give his Game Boy Micro tiger stripes. Girls too decorated and toyed with their devices, like Kathy, who got an MP3 player for Christmas: by June the screen was held together with tape and she had painted the back case completely with red sparkly nail polish (figure 4).

42 Randy’s use of the term “redneck” was unique at the school or in the broader community, as far as I know, and stemmed in part from his interest in comedian Larry the Cable Guy. His interest in the confederate flag was always directly linked to the “General Lee,” the hot-rod car with the flag on its roof from the television show and movie *Dukes of Hazard*. Rather than positioning him within the local sensibility of rusticity shared by his peers, Randy’s identification as “redneck” and use of confederate iconography contributed to his relative social isolation.
Randy was the only kid who even once mentioned the left and right channels of a recording. But, like the rest of the kids at Heartsboro, he never seemed concerned about listening to the full stereo soundscape—which the widespread practice of listening with just one ear, of course, completely devalued. For Randy a new pair of earbuds missing labels presented an opportunity for tinkering and design, more than a difficulty to faithful listening, and even the sonic organization of the audio track was put in service of the object and its decoration, rather than appreciated on its own.

**Tinkering and tethering in the circulation of recordings**

Noting Randy’s use of the stereo sound of a recording to organize his earbuds on his body, rather than to structure his listening as such, children’s material orientations toward MP3 players can provide clues about their conceptions of music and sound. Common understandings of sound and music as uniquely ephemeral, even disembodied, suggest that hearing is especially susceptible to technological or schizophrenic mediations. Further,
infinite reproducibility—that media files can be transferred and copied without any loss of information, unlike analog recordings or film photographs—is seen as a central feature linking postmodern technological and cultural configurations, the characteristic affordance of digital media. But kids at HCS often ignored or rejected such characteristically “digital” capacities of their devices, instead approaching the circulation of sound recordings in ways that located them within the material world, rather than as placeless and immaterial digital “files.” In particular, many used the built-in (and very low quality) microphones in their MP3 players to record and circulate music. They put the microphone up to their television or to computer speakers to record music from a music video, rather than searching for a song on the Internet, downloading it (possibly paying for it with a parent’s credit card), and transferring it to their MP3 player. Or they placed an earbud to the microphone, to transfer music from one device to another.

At eighth-grade gym class, held outdoors in June, several girls sat out because it was “too hot.” Amber listened to her iPod, while Sarah fiddled with her friend’s MP3 player and her very new cell phone—a Motorola RAZR. Flipping open the RAZR, she looked at the screen for a bit and then played a song using the phone’s speakers. I asked her where she got the music—off of the Internet? I imagined she was using one of the new music-downloading services the cell phone companies had been aggressively advertising. She shook her head and held up the MP3 player. “Off of this.”

I was puzzled. MP3 players, I thought, did not connect from device to device—you had to use a computer to transfer files.
So Sarah demonstrated for me, holding one earbud up to the microphone on her phone. As she showed me, the music was interrupted by a loud girlish screech, and Sarah said, “Erica was being loud during that part. She ruined it.” But Sarah let the song play on despite being “ruined,” and she and her friends would continue to listen to this track on the phone over the rest of the school year.

During interviews kids would often place their earbuds up to my recorder to “show” me songs.43 Notably, they only used their MP3 players to record or share music; they never used them to record one another. My audio recorder would elicit performative talk from kids of all ages, but the kids never seemed interested in listening to themselves later, even when I offered. Younger kids would do funny voices or sing when I took it out, and older kids would say swear words or insults, or call one another gay or stupid. But their own devices were just for songs.

Kids would also record music off of the Internet or television, including advertising jingles and TV theme songs. When I asked Randy in an interview, “would you say you like music?” his immediate response was, “well, my custom radio says so, yeah!” He went on to tell me about the seven speakers he had attached to an old boombox and wired around his room with strobe lights. When I asked Randy about what types of music he likes, he said “rock, heavy metal stuff, country. And the occasional anime shows. You know like—the show’s so awesome I can’t even remember the name of it. Blood Plus there. That’s a good show.”

“Yeah?”

43 This turned out to be tremendously useful documentation of what might have been playing on kids devices during recordings where otherwise the microphone would only pick up their talk.
“Yeah, they always have cool theme songs. Actually I got like ten of ’em on here,” he said, pulling out his MP3 player.

I noticed the white earbuds and asked, “what are these, iPod headphones?”

“No, I stole them from my brother.” Randy laughed.

“What’s this, like your fifth pair this year or something?”

“I used the ones from the airplane. They sucked.” Randy found his song. “This is one of those Japanese anime ones. It’s from Final Fantasy Dirge of Cerberus. It’s a cool song.” He held one of the earbuds up to the microphone on my recorder. He whispered to me, to avoid disrupting the recording he was making for me, “that’s how I got it on here—I recorded this off the Internet [i.e., from one of the speakers attached to a computer]. Off Dirge of Cerberus.” We both listened closely to the quiet recording being played on tiny headphones resting on the table. As he transferred music that he had originally recorded from computer speakers from his MP3 player onto my recorder, Randy was executing a fully analogue chain of transfers between digital devices, as though this were a completely normal way to move songs around.

Randy listed several other shows whose songs he liked. He described the theme to Death Note for me, and then remembered, “I still need to record that. I gotta write that down.” He told me that he would stay up to watch the shows when they came on late on Saturday night. He would set his TV’s timer to remind him, and then hold the MP3 player up to TV speakers and record the song. He picked up his MP3 player to show me how. “See that, that’s the mike. What you do is when you turn it on, it takes forever. Here we go. You go like this. And it says ‘recorder.’ Then it’ll be like that,” he pointed to a menu on the screen, “and you just
go like this and it’s recording. See? And if you don’t want to save it you’ll see an X. You just swap over to that and go tsiu.” Randy finished with a laser-gun sound effect for X’ing out the songs.

Earlier in the year Randy and a couple other boys rode with me on a field trip to hear the author Lois Lowry talk, and I let them pick songs on my iPod to play in the car. When “Stronger,” the new Kanye West single, came on, Randy pulled his MP3 player out of his bag and stuck it down at the speaker in the door by his feet. Several months later, I was making a CD of songs for him and asked if he wanted that song. He said no, because he already had it—“don’t you remember I got it when we were on that trip before?”

At our interview Randy continued through the songs on his MP3 player. He found “Party Like a Rockstar,” and said, “that’s one of the ones I got from music class”—he had recorded it during the music show-and-tell that was a regular part of my music class. He said, “you’ll hear it stop, you’ll hear Kathy’s voice on there eventually.”

I asked, “does the fuzziness bother you at all?”

“No not really. I know how far to keep them away from the speakers, and sometimes the fuzziness doesn’t affect ’em at all. Like this one, this is from King of Hearts. This one I need to redo. I mean, it’s good, but it’s kind of weird.”

I suggested, “you might be able to find the actual songs on the Internet.”

But Randy dismissed this out of hand: “I don’t even know the names of them.”

Sarah and Randy were from opposite ends of the social hierarchy. Sarah had a large and close group of friends that was widely acknowledged as high-status. Randy, on the other hand, had no close friends, and few people even to hang out with. He was widely
acknowledged to be a social maladroit. Sarah and Randy had very different taste in music. Randy represented an extreme version of this do-it-yourself, tinkering ethos of music listening, and he loved to repair and retrofit his old and broken stereo and his old and broken MP3 player. Sarah and her friends were early adopters of shiny new technology, like Sarah’s RAZR phone and Michelle’s portable Sirius Radio receiver. Nonetheless, they both moved music around in this remarkable way, from earbud to microphone. My own first reaction to Sarah recording music directly from an earbud was disbelief, and I suggested to Randy that these recorded copies Randy passed from device to device were somehow less real than digital sound files, the “actual songs.” It would never occur to me to move songs around like this. The layers of *infidelity* to high quality digital reproduction represented by such a practice were stacked upon one another: MP3 encoding already represents concessions of quality to portability; cheap earbuds hardly produce decent playback, and with only one earbud transferring music to the microphone, half the original track is lost; the microphones on MP3 players and cell phones are barely suitable even for casual voice recording; and the audio from the microphone is then subjected to further degradation from another round of low bitrate MP3 encoding.

It would be easy to see these practices as simply kids’ accommodation to necessity—they lacked ready income, credit cards, and computer skills to move songs through the “normal” digital channels from the Internet and from one device to another—or even a “deficiency” in their understanding of their devices’ affordances. But these practices certainly were faithful to an alternate conception of music, in which sound, songs, and recordings were integrated into the physical, spatial, and embodied world that children and their music devices occupy.
Sarah and Randy both transferred music by connecting one physically present device to another with the umbilicus of their earbud cables. As they held the earbuds up to the microphones, they transferred sound from one vibrating membrane to another, in real time. If anything, the recordings they made were composed more of “actual” sounds and music than digitally encoded representations. On the Internet songs would be found by searching for meta-data—titles, artist names, dates, etc.—but as Randy points out, he did not know the names of many songs on his device. He did, on the other, hand, know very clearly how the songs sounded. So, just as MP3 players themselves existed as objects as much as media, it seems as though songs and music existed for HCS kids as sounds more than as files, and so to move music from device to device the song had to actually resound in physical space.

**Sound as material culture**

Stephen Connor writes that sound “strikes us as at once intensely corporeal—sound literally moves, shakes, and touches us—and mysteriously immaterial” (2004:157). The “immateriality” of sound contributes directly to the transcendence of space and place that Bull documents among adult iPod users, which Ito terms “cocooning.” In the face of such powerful and pervasive discourses of immateriality that surround new media, weighing in forcefully on the latter conception of sound, it takes a certain ingenuity for children to envision the corporeality of sound, and to see in MP3 players—these iconic objects of new media—material affordances for circulation, movement, embodiment, and sharing. But these practices fit perfectly within the clear and present demands of kids’ social and material environment, in which objects and bodies constantly circulate and interact in immediate,
face-to-face settings. To seek out some digital file on the Internet would require turning attention away from this rich and solid social world. Sound “constitutes a form of material action” (Witmore 2006:276), and it is this potential for material action—for play, manipulation, tinkering, investigation—that I argued at the outset is central to the identification of some thing as “childish.” The devices stuck in their clothes and tangling among their bodies, and the sounds those devices produced, were thus available to be toyed with, using the sort of immediate agency kids cultivate as they climb in and around their environment and put objects in physical contact. Connor writes about “a restoration of . . . equilibrium in the face of the extreme disembodiment of hearing, a reclaiming of the proximal tactility of the here-and-now body” (2004:171). But it appears that children need not “reclaim” anything at all. Their cultures of hearing have retained the “proximal tactility” of their cultures of materiality, grounded among practices that include boxing a pear, climbing on a jungle gym, collecting and trading cards, or building medieval weapons out of pencils, masking tape, and chains of paper clips.

The question remains, why wouldn’t kids use their MP3 players to record one another’s voices when they would use them for songs? When voices did appear on their recordings, they were always accidental interruptions of a song. When kids performed for my recording device, they were never interested in listening back to themselves, even though they often created rather sophisticated voices and characters for the benefit of the recorder sitting on the lunch table. The above discussion demonstrates that, for these kids, pop songs were understood as material sound that circulated as sound. But that does not mean that sound performances are undifferentiated. That songs could be recorded and then passed around as
recordings, while kids’ voices were, at most, simply recorded and then forgotten, suggests that the distinction lies in circulation. Songs, though rarely understood by kids as digital computer “files,” were, nonetheless, bounded texts that had the capacity to circulate (Silverstein and Urban 1996). But kids’ singing into the recorder also involves mediations: the entextualization of sounds into music and words into lyrics is a mediation not unlike inscribing recorded sounds into binary code and thus into files with metadata. The distinction, then, is not between objectified sound files and undifferentiated materiality, but rather between various degrees of textual abstraction: rather more abstract digital files, and rather more immediate sounding songs. Relative, rather than absolute, values are important in a school context, where things that are less mediated or abstracted take on ideological valences of intimacy. Thus, the immediate interactivity of bodies and things that characterizes the childish material culture I have been describing in this chapter is a part of a broader logic of intimacy that contrasts decontextualized and instrumental orientations toward communication, others, and the environment from contextually grounded orientations. Associations with children’s material culture, then, provide the historically grounded tradition through which kids can distinguish certain modes of expression as natural and childish while other modes are unnatural and unnecessary—pointing to precisely the sort of dynamic of expressive contrast between instrumental and intimate modes that I discuss in chapter 1.

Kids’ voices, then, are even less available for mediation and abstraction than pop songs, which are already entextualized as songs and commodified as recordings. Thus, while kids enjoy the recorder as an audience that elicits their performative vocalizations, to turn around
and listen to their performances would activate their language and voices as mediated, entextualized, objectified, and thus is resisted.\textsuperscript{44} In chapter 6 I discuss kids’ expressive “inarticulateness”—moments when they refuse to vocalize or discourse about some teacher-prompted topic, preferring instead to communicate with one another through more immediate and intimate means. This chapter, by exploring the materiality of recorded pop songs in kids’ practice, provides a context for understanding how the materiality of language, poetics, and communication are implicated in these same technologically and commercially mediated approaches to mediation.

\textsuperscript{44} By contrast the “spontaneous” vocalizations of children presented in Kidz Bop’s recordings present exactly these sort of performances back to kids as entexualizable. But kids tend to think the Kidz Bop recordings are kind of dumb, and that the recorded kids singing aren’t really very good.
Chapter 5

Intimate Media, Video Games, and Sociality in the Classroom

In this chapter I consider situations where MP3 players and related devices, especially video games, were used not just in school, but specifically in the classroom, with the larger goal of understanding how kids’ consumer media practices were not simply in opposition to school, but an integral part of their school experience.

But before moving to the classroom, it is worth underscoring how the listening and interactional practices I have been pointing to take on a particular meaning and importance in school by pointing to ways in which they appear *not* to happen outside of school. Practices like sharing earbuds were ubiquitous in the peculiarly intimate public spaces of school, but they appeared to be much less common in non-school spaces, where the friendships in which it flourished were less dominant social formations. Though kids might listen together on the bus or when visiting one another’s homes, they did not often share earbuds with siblings or parents. Students explained to me repeatedly in interviews that when at home or with family they would listen individually, either in their room with the door closed or wearing both earbuds. These modes of listening point exactly toward the rationalization and compartmentalization described by Sterne, suggesting that the intimate and sociable listening practices I have been describing thus far are built into the institutional and social contexts of school itself. This is, on the one hand, a trivial statement of the fact that there are more kids at school, and therefore more friends, and therefore more opportunities for doing things friends do. But the fact that kids spend more time with other kids their own age (“peers”) at
school than out of school is not trivial at all. Rather, this is the key fact for understanding the social structure of schools. “Peer culture”—the enduring analytical category of childhood and education scholars—seems to be in many ways a product of schooling, which implicitly and explicitly structures the ways children and adults relate and interact with one another, and peer culture certainly could not exist in its modern forms without schools collecting and age-grading their communities’ children together for several hours everyday. Much of my argument that media consumption is about schooling is simply part of a larger argument, laid out in chapter 1, that childhood itself is substantively about schooling, and vice versa. That media, entertainment, and consumerism are then articulated to childhood within the institutional co-construction of childhood and schooling is the analytical task at hand.

Throughout my interviews with the kids at HCS, when I asked about music their first response was often to describe the way they used music to negotiate space at home. They mentioned disputes about their music being too loud, limitations on where they could listen to music, or negotiations of what the whole family would listen to on the car stereo (where those who did not get what they wanted would put on their own music with headphones, if they owned a music device).

Amber’s little brother, third-grader Robbie, drew this picture after Christmas (figure 5):
In the drawing, Robbie drew himself and his sister both listening to earbuds and singing songs from High School Musical 2—“Bet On It” and “What Time Is It (Summertime).” In the picture a stereo plugged into the wall plays Hannah Montana’s first single, “The Best of Both Worlds.” The kids’ mom yells “Stop singing you [two].” Amber yells “I hate that song!” and Robbie responds “I love it.” All in all, a lot of noise (music?) is seen coming from voices and speakers (though all the music is from the Disney Channel).

Later on Amber elaborated on her family’s household noise/music dynamic during an interview. She told me, “I have to keep [my music] down low cause Robbie is usually listening to his music—”

Alice jumped in, “on the computer, blaring it—”
And Amber finished, whispering conspiratorially, “That’s why Santa got him headphones,” and laughed.

I described the scene in Robbie’s picture, and Alice commented, “what he likes to do is he likes to have his headphones, and *sings*.”

“It’s horrible! You could die in that house.”

Robbie’s drawing dramatized a partitioning of sound and space, in which each space has its own music playback device: Robbie’s earbuds, Amber’s earbuds, and the boombox plugged into the wall. Again, this is the sort of rationalization that Sterne describes, where parents buy a third-grade boy headphones so that he can listen to music independently, without disturbing the rest of the family. That partitioning appears utterly to fail, and Robbie’s picture delights in the chaos and cacophony when music from headphones and loudspeakers are layered with singing and yelling. Even here, where the kids in the house are seen to be wearing earbuds the “right” way, each sealed into their private units, the listening is so noisy that Robbie’s mom must intervene (though her calling for quiet seems only to serve the overall sense of noisily overlapping speakers and voices).

Robbie’s drawing exposes the limits of rationalized sound in a household context, but still the primary social consequence of music listening in his drawing is *intrusion*—certainly not interaction or intimate connection. Something like the dynamic expressed in this scene seemed to occur less dramatically in most households; almost every kid explained to me that when at home they would listen privately, either in their room with the door closed or wearing earbuds. Otherwise, as Amber and Alice point out, listening at home in shared spaces could be an unwanted intrusion to others. The separateness of the listening
environments in Robbie’s drawing suggests that different environments necessitated different listening practices. Just as earbuds mostly did not cross social boundaries of status, gender, age, and friendship, they also did not link brother and sister, or parent and child. Therefore, the “intimate” practices I’ve been pointing out can be seen as importantly linked to school. So let’s look at situations where music listening and educational practices come into direct contact and conflict, in the classroom.

**Music listening in the classroom**

Like Robbie’s mom, teachers also call for quiet. One can sometimes get the sense that an ideally manageable classroom would involve just the sort of partitioning of each student from every other student that rationalized listening points to. But unlike Robbie’s mom yelling “stop singing” to two kids individually singing different favorite songs, teacher’s imperatives to “stop talking” or “quiet down” are almost always directed at students who are interacting with each other.

In chapter 3 I mentioned that sometimes in Art Class kids used earbuds as quiet speakers, which had the felicitous effect of not disrupting groups at other tables who did not want to listen to particular music. This allowed for finer-grained organization of music listening than the Art teacher’s normal practice of putting music on for the whole class to encourage quiet, independent work. But in classroom settings other than Art, teachers almost never played music. In most classes music listening was strictly forbidden. Even if a teacher were to allow music, listening together using earbuds as speakers or sharing them would have been precluded by seating arrangements that often intentionally separated friends to prevent in-
class socialization. Students often campaigned to be allowed to listen privately while doing their work, but they were always denied. Still, kids worked together to find ways to bring their small and easily concealed devices into class, despite teachers’ restrictions.

At the beginning of the year they tried threading the earbuds through the body of a hooded sweatshirt and up through the neck, hiding the earbuds under its hood. But hats and hoods were also regulated by teachers, and students quickly learned that they couldn’t get away with this, because wearing a hood in class was itself an easy way to get the attention of a teacher. Over time a group of older girls worked out that the most effective tactic was to thread the cable not through the neck of their sweatshirts, but through the sleeve to the wrist, palming the earbud and listening with their head resting in their hand. With the earbud in their hand, they could quickly hide it in their sleeve if necessary. Efforts to find the best way to listen in class were collaborative. Despite the fact that in these situations kids listened individually, and despite the care they took to conceal their listening from teachers, they would publicize their surreptitious listening by gesturing to friends and quietly laughing when they could see that the teacher was not looking. They would copy one another, and share notes out of class about how best to avoid detection. These social efforts at finding best practices for concealing music devices in class resembled other activities, like note passing, where students would collaborate and share results to develop new and creative ways to conceal their behavior from teachers.

In the fall the kids were still figuring out how to sneak their devices into class, and their conversation suggested how they understood music listening to be a practice similar to note-passing and playing video games. One day in October seventh and eighth graders Jenn,
Amber, and Kathy stood around the swings after having taken the NECAP standardized tests that the whole school was taking that week. Jenn explained to her friends that the reason she was always the last one done with the NECAPs because she would pass notes and talk. “And Mr. B. never notices,” she said, referring to their teacher. “Did you see the notes flying around?”

I asked, “Do you guys get in trouble for passing notes?”

Amber and Kathy, not as joyfully rebellious as Jenn, said, “Sort of, not really.” “You’re not supposed to.”

“But you guys aren’t really very careful about it. You just pass them back and forth. Like this—” I swung my arms widely.

Jenn laughed. “Yeah, and he doesn’t see. Sometimes he’s looking right at me and he doesn’t see.”

“And yesterday Willy was playing his Game Boy while you were supposed to be reading.”

Jenn laughed again and volunteered, “Sometimes we take the headphones,” she demonstrated with her MP3 player and neon earbuds, “and slide this part [the headphone cable] up our sweaters and it comes out at the neck. And we listen and he doesn’t even know.”

Amber: “Yeah, and you can put your hair down to hide the earbuds.”

By the end of the year, Jenn and another friend, Michelle, explained to me their more established system for listening to music in class. After talking a bit about when and where they listened to music at home and their negotiations with parents and siblings over noise and
taste, I asked them to talk about listening to music in school. Jenn said, “Sometimes we listen in class if we like shove it up our sleeve.” I realized that in the time that passed between these two conversations, I hadn’t actually witnessed the middle-school kids listening to music in class, though I documented plenty of note passing, spitball throwing, and even video-games tucked into open textbooks (as one would do with comics or a magazine).

“I’ve seen you guys do a lot of stuff, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen you do that.”

Michelle said, “That’s because we’re good at hiding it. ’Cause it’s in the sleeve.”

Jenn said, “Yeah, you gotta put it in this pocket—” she gestured to the pocket at the belly of her sweatshirt, “and you gotta have it go up—” her hand followed her sleeve from the shoulder to the wrist. “But you need to do it on your left hand.”

“So you can write with your right hand,” Michelle finished.

“Ohhhh. So you’re not running it up through your hood.”

“No.”

“You’re running it up through your sleeve. And then you can take it right out.”

Michelle: “So then you just like hold it in your hand and go like that—” she pressed her ear to her hand, as if she were resting her head. “My brother does it in high school, and he says he walks around all day like this—” she put her hand back to her ear, “and nobody says anything.”

“On Monday Erica got like a half an hour to listen to her music until Mr. B. noticed,” Jenn reported.

“Oh, he did notice?”
“Yeah, she didn’t—she just, like, had it in her ear,” Michelle said, noting Erica’s failure to use the established best practice.

“Would your teachers ever let you listen to music?”

“No. But you can’t tell the difference if we have [the earbud] in or not, so I don’t see why it matters,” Michelle complained.

Jenn agreed, “As long as you can hear [i.e., the teacher or the lesson], why do they care?”

I mentioned again that sometimes the boys play their Game Boys under their desks. Michelle and Jenn laughed. Michelle said, “But a Game Boy’s more noticeable. Because they’re like actually sitting there looking down, not concentrating.”

“Kind of like when you read your own books,” Jenn added, and both girls laughed.

I described one of the seventh-grade boys, Zack, who “always has something in his lap. Sometimes it’s a book and sometimes it’s a Game Boy, but he’s just always got something going on.”

The girls laughed, and Jenn commented, “I don’t understand how he still gets A’s.”

After describing in detail all the ways they sneak MP3 players into class, Jenn’s comment that she doesn’t understand how Zack can read books or play video games suggests a complex differentiation of modes of media consumption and orientations to the classroom. When the girls listened to MP3 players in class, they said, they were still doing their schoolwork or following the lesson. At a minimum they had to attend to the teacher to avoid being caught, prepared to palm the earbud and lift their heads in answer to a question. The music from the earbud was in the background of their attention, for the most part, and the girls were very careful that with the other ear they participated in the group activities of class.
In contrast, sometimes the girls would “read [their] own books” in class, which involved, they suggested, “not concentrating” on lessons or schoolwork. That orientation was more common in the boys’ classroom use of video games, which, Jenn and Michelle suggested, were totally immersive, and could not accommodate simultaneous attention to the lesson and the game. So while listening in class may not have involved the same physical connections to a co-listener as sharing earbuds during free time, Jenn and Michelle suggest that it did require a similar layering of attention between music and interaction and a similarly intimate integration of the devices with kids’ bodily stance and gesture. In their telling, listening to music in class would be inappropriate, and collective efforts to hide their listening were intimacy building, but, they argued, it did not detract from the pedagogical goals of the lesson, and thus would not lead to a breakdown of articulateness. School and media interactions might coexist, Jenn and Michelle seem to think.

**Video games in the classroom: layering, interaction, attention (a slight digression for comparison’s sake)**

Jenn and Michelle emphasized the necessity of layering their attention, overlapping music listening with classroom “concentration.” They seemed to identify visually focused activities like gaming and reading as more attention-intensive. Jenn’s bewilderment at Zack’s ability to read and play games in class is parallel to the responses of many adults to the idea of listening with one ear and talking, reading, or following a lesson with the other. Here I will briefly explore the sociality and interactivity of boys’ gaming practices, to compare them with portable music practices, and to point out that gaming, despite some qualitative differences in the forms of attention, seems to be comparably interactive and socially
embedded. As I try to show here, portable gaming devices are caught up in a communicative ecology that includes note-passing, whispering, and earbud-sharing, so examining devices like the Game Boy DS can provide significant context for understanding portable music. One more reason to examine games is because they are, like music players, television, and the Internet, an important repository of music and sound, as the examples from earlier in the chapter, of the second-grade art class and Willy’s sound effects interjection into a social studies lesson, suggest.

Gaming is a topic of a lot of current research, though only recently have the interactions among people playing games together met with sustained attention. In particular Stevens, Satwicz, and McCarthy (2007) develop a paradigm that distinguishes activities “in-game,” “in-room,” and “in-world,” where the interactions “in-room” by players and people in their proximity are the link between gameplay and players’ broader, “in-world” settings. Lenhart et al. (2008) point out that in correlations between gaming and measures of school and social success, the key variable seems to be whether adolescents play games alone or with other people in the same room. Both studies point out that anxious accounts of gaming as anti-social focus excessively on the “immersion” of players into the activities “in-game,” when it is apparent that players in fact are able to and do attend to and participate in social situations in their immediate environment.

If sharing earbuds involves a physically intimate linkage between friends, then the general lack of boys’ sharing can be understood as part of a broader masculine aversion to certain types of physical intimacy with other boys, which becomes culturally salient as boys enter adolescence. But playing games together, without the physical tether of an earbud cable
mandating proximity, was a similarly sociable activity. Just as Zack layered his gaming with classroom participation and Nate and Ben had to fight the urge to gesticulate across the room when one of them blew the other’s go-kart up with a turtle shell in the game, in out-of-class peer-group settings it was rare that a kid would play a video game in isolation, focused solely on the game. Usually games were an opportunity to do something together. Even if only one boy was playing, he would have others looking over his shoulder and commenting. So when boys played video games together, rather than being sucked into the screen, you have several kids doing something together, laughing, talking, and bouncing their talk off of what is happening on the screen. There was an intense social relationship between the kids around the screen.

Jenn and Michelle’s picture of Zack sucked into his game, unable to concentrate on the activities of the classroom around him, reiterates the basic outlines of the anxious narrative of gaming, and it exposes their lack of knowledge about Zack’s actual classroom practices (ironically, in light of their own annoyance at teachers’ inability to see that they can both listen to music and read at the same time). For instance: in March I observed a science lesson about the seasons, during which the seventh- and eight-grade teacher, Mr. B., used a flashlight and globe to examine the changing position of the sun at different points in the Earth’s orbit. Taking advantage of the dimmed lights and his spot toward the rear of the classroom, Zack played his Nintendo DS under his desk, and when the teacher asked “what time of year is it when the sun is pointing to the tropic of cancer,” and demonstrating on the globe, Zack raised his hand, continuing play under his desk with the other hand, and answered the question when called on. He continued to participate in the lesson without
ending his game. Jenn’s comparison to reading was apt: Zack also read books constantly, and he would do the same thing with books in class, reading in his lap while still following and participating in the lesson.

Just like listening to music in class, playing games during a lesson put kids at risk of discipline from teachers. Zack and Mr. B. had an ongoing dispute about his reading books during class, but Mr. B. also encouraged Zack’s reading. So when Mr. B. would note Zack’s downward gaze and call him on it, if Zack was playing his game he would quickly swap it with a book in his desk, to cop to the lesser infraction of reading outside materials during a lesson. Kids would hide their devices in an open textbook (like a comic book), to be slipped quickly away into the desk at a glance from the teacher. Teachers were much less sympathetic to gaming in class than to reading, note-passing, or even music listening, and playing games kids risked real punishments rather than the reprimands the other transgressions would elicit.

One winter morning during silent reading, eighth-grader Nate looked back at me from his seat in the last row of desks and whispered, “Mr. Bickford.” He showed me his DS inside a book below his desk. I smiled in acknowledgement and glanced up to see the teacher noticing our interaction. I looked away, but could see from the corner of my eye that Nate was still trying to get my attention, not aware of the teacher’s look. Across the room, Ben was also playing his DS, with his head resting on his desk. Nate gave up on getting my attention and the teacher looked away. I noticed that Ben and Nate kept looking over at each other, laughing quietly through their noses. Ben quickly hid his device under his desk as his brother, seventh-grader Willy walked past on his way to the bathroom, apparently hyper-
cautious about drawing too much attention, rather than concerned that Willy might
disapprove and alert the teacher.

Sitting next to Ben, Randy watched him play, without a book or anything to disguise his
attention. As Nate and Ben exchanged another look, Nate saw me observing. He smiled and
nodded proudly, and smiled at Willy as he returned from the bathroom—showing off, less
worried than Ben. Randy took out his own Game Boy Micro and started to play, but the click
of his keys seemed much louder than the other devices. The teacher, reading, cleared his
throat, and all three game-playing boys started and hid their devices in their desks.

Seeing all was clear, Nate looked back at me and pointed to Ben, mouthing the words,
“I’m playing with him.”

I mouthed back, “you’re playing with Ben?”

He nodded, impressed with himself, and looked back down at his device. The DS’s can
connect wirelessly.

Ben kept looking over to Nate, wanting to whisper something, but Nate was now making
an effort not to look up too much to avoid calling attention to himself—the teacher’s cough
alerting him to the risk of being caught. Both boys displayed a strong inclination to interact
through words and gesture, and not just through the gameplay itself, but by responding to the
gameplay action by communicating directly across the room. Interacting silently, just
through gameplay, was not a familiar mode for them.

Nate and Ben continued to play until the bell rang for recess, without getting caught. At
recess Nate told me they were playing “battle mode” on the game *Mario Kart*, and bragged
to me a bit about what they just got away with. He told me about how the DS’s also allow for
wireless chatting, using a stylus to send handwritten notes to other proximate devices—but which would not work for commenting during ongoing gameplay.

That evening was the middle-school dance. I had volunteered as the DJ, and since dancing was not necessarily an appealing activity for the boys in attendance, Nate came and talked to me on the stage for a while. He asked me why I write about their Game Boys in my notebook all the time. I told him that I try to write down as much as possible what happened during the day, and I tended to focus on things like the stuff they get away with in class.

Nate asked me if I wrote about the incident, a couple days earlier, when Willy and Sam had thrown peanuts pilfered from the lunchroom at me while the teacher was briefly out of the room, testing the limits of transgressions I would be willing to forgive and/or not rat them out about to their teacher. Nate laughed when I told him that I did write about that, and he called over to Willy to tell him that I had recorded the incident. It seems that they had gossiped and bragged about it among themselves afterward, savoring having pegged an adult—a quasi-teacher—with projectiles during class. The incident framed that day’s in-class gaming in terms of rule-breaking and transgression, and at my question Nate very formally told my recorder that, “DS’s help us kids, mainly kids, communicate to each other in class, during reading. Yes, that's right, during class, the teacher unknowingly knowing [i.e., unaware] that we are doing it. The reason why we do this is [so] the teacher does not see us pass notes, which basically cancels the note passing. Also we don't have to talk over anybody, which also get us in trouble. This is the end of our segment. Goodbye.”

A few days earlier I had watched as Daisy and Michelle made Nate the middle man in a marathon of back-and-forth note passing that lasted almost half an hour. Nate was clearly
very uncomfortable being put in jeopardy with someone else’s illicit notes, and he was almost caught holding the note when Mr. B. finally witnessed the exchange and reprimanded the girls. After class he told Daisy, “you guys should get DS’s.” At the dance I asked about his comment to Daisy, and he told me, “With the DS’s . . . you don’t even have to move or throw anything. It’s so much easier. And they call us geeks. I mean come on—it has its advantages.”

Apparently there is a strong mutual misunderstanding between some of the older boys and older girls about each other’s communication and media practices. Jenn and Michelle could not understand Zack and the other boys playing games during class because they assumed it would distract from their school work (just as teachers would not understand Jenn and Michelle’s music listening for the same reasons). And Nate here could not understand the girls’ dismissal of the obvious advantages of devices like his DS for illicit communication during class. Nate was probably wrong that old-fashioned notes did not measure up to wireless devices for in-class communication, especially when weighing the severity of getting caught with a note (relatively minor) versus a Game Boy (serious). It is interesting to note Nate’s nervousness about being caught with other people’s notes in contrast to his enthusiasm for really much riskier uses of portable gaming devices.

Despite their mutual misunderstandings, Jenn, Michelle, and Nate suggest that in kids’ minds listening, gaming, and note-passing are relatively interchangeable, or at least comparable, though they come with different affordances that could be measured against different contexts or using different assumptions. Each practice is understood specifically as a fundamental transgression of teacher’s expectations for the classroom, while at the same
time no one suggests that this would be a reason not to listen to music, pass notes, or play video games. Importantly, though both video games and music listening have the potential for individual immersive isolation, students appear to be as critical of that possibility as adults, and defensive when accused that their own media practices might be isolating and detrimental to learning. For the girls, reading a book would be more deleterious to learning than listening to music, even though reading, or course, is a pedagogically sanctioned activity in a way that popular music listening almost never is.

**Media, “multitasking,” and social differentiation**

These kids are weighing in on a broader conversation about “backchannel” communication using digital media in classroom or lecture settings (Yardi 2008; J. F. McCarthy and boyd 2005). Of course, the devices in question are MP3 players and Game Boys rather than chat rooms or social networking sites, and Jenn and Michelle don’t appeal to the progressive promise of digital media for transcending interactional limitations of the classroom, so much as they find themselves conducting a rearguard action defending practices long since staked out by middle-school kids. Backchannel communication in a classroom setting is precisely what “peers” have always attempted and what teachers have always forbidden. Turning one’s attention and communication, however briefly, away from the monologic teacher at the head of the class and toward one’s classmates is perhaps the canonical move of “peer culture.” Sharing earbuds materializes such a move with cables and speakers, but it may be more generally understood as characteristically “childish.”
Readers might see in this discussion anecdotal evidence supporting the idea that girls or women are better at “multitasking” than boys or men. To my knowledge such a hypothesis has little confirmation in experimental literature, and variables governing when and how people focus their attention are likely too complicated and overdetermined by history and social arrangements to be confirmable using experimental methods. Nonetheless, I want to underscore that the examples discussed here suggest rather many different modes of layering attention, all of which might be called “multitasking.” The salient issue here is not individuals’ objective capacities, but rather their subjective evaluations of one another’s practices of layering attention to media, peers, and classroom lessons. To the extent “multitasking” is relevant here (since the examples discussed support rather many different modes of layered attention), it is as part of these discourses of criticism and incomprehension that are an important trope in kids’ performances of gender difference. That is not the subject of this study, however.

Instead, the interesting point with multitasking is less whether it is “real” or “effective” or “detrimental” to some specified educational goals, than that it seems to stand as an important element in individuals and groups’ misunderstandings of one another, and in their expressions of affiliation and differentiation—of solidarity and exclusion. Discourses around multitasking are traditionally exoticizing. Commonly identified with women, multitasking is increasingly linked to children and especially to the exoticizing discourses around technology and “digital natives” (Herring 2008). Hence a 2006 *Time* magazine article titled, “The

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45 Data about kids’ media use suggests that multitasking is not at all primarily an activity of girls. The Kaiser Family Foundation finds that about of all kids 8 to 18 years old, about 30 percent of their media use is spent on more than one medium concurrently, but girls, in fact, do this slightly less than boys (Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts 2010:43).
Multitasking Generation,” which quotes a 14-year-old girl saying, “My parents always tell me I can’t do homework while listening to music, but they don’t understand that it helps me concentrate” (Wallis 2006). Framing multitasking in terms of misunderstanding between individuals from different social groups is the key move here, which is apparent as well in HCS students’ discourse. Even when we account for the expressions of incomprehension between girls and boys at HCS, it is clear that the primary distinction they see implicated in multitasking is between children and adults—thus taking on themselves the exoticizing representations placed on them by adult commentators. Insofar as multitasking seems to refer to the layering of attention among different, immediate contexts, perhaps it makes sense to understand it as part of the broader framework of intimacy and instrumentality outlined in chapter 1—at least insofar as instrumental communication, like essayist literacy and IRE interactions, constructs itself as monologic and decontextualized, and has no brief for “distraction.” Therefore, the overall point is that these practices are about setting out the terms of individual and group identifications, and media use can again be seen as central to the construction of children’s social roles and affiliations.
Chapter 6

Inappropriate and Inarticulate: Portable Media Devices and Expressive Practices in School

In the previous three chapters I examined how MP3 players and earbuds afforded certain modes of intimate interaction, how they were embedded within particularly “childish” material traditions, and how kids used them even in classroom situations. In this chapter I examine how musical media practices in school, in class or out, might be located within an expressive tradition that can also be understood as “childish”—but which is engaged primarily with the bureaucratic organization of language and communication in school. Media, childishness, and intimacy, in this case, are linked elements in a larger communicative ecology of education. My goal is to understand the uses of these devices as modes of expression and communication that make the most sense when understood in the institutional context of school. I am especially concerned with non-verbal interactions concerning portable media devices. But to make sense of such non-verbal modes of expression, I note first a few examples of kids’ poetic (verbally expressive) interventions to destabilize and reorganize the sociality of their classrooms, and I briefly discuss “swearing” as an expressive repertoire that some kids explicitly linked to their identities as kids. From this basis, I establish that “inappropriateness” and “inarticulateness” are important elements of the intimate expressive repertoires that I argue in chapter 1 should be understood as constitutive of kids’ social status in school. I examine instances where MP3 players are centrally placed items in inappropriate and inarticulate expressive practices, which points to
consumer media devices as an important element in kids’ articulation of solidarity with one another in school. Finally I describe how these devices were sometimes used in the classroom, in direct, if often hidden, confrontation with teachers. Throughout this chapter I explore situations in which kids are clearly oriented toward the school (often in an oppositional stance), and by seeing the institutional meaning embedded in uses of these devices, I argue that such an orientation toward school is implicit even in kids’ consumer practices with friends that do not explicitly call attention to the institutional context.

**Expressive repertoires**

Certain expressive repertoires were codified and named as markers of students’ intimate and oppositional identifications as “kids.” One of these repertoires was “swearing.” On the first day of school in September, immediately after eighth-graders Amber and Daisy finished their spectacular demonstration of swinging together while sharing earbuds (discussed in the beginning of chapter 3), Daisy looked up and me and asked, by way of introduction, “Do you swear?”

I was already awkward and uncomfortable on my first day at Heartsboro, and I was caught off guard. I indirectly agreed that, okay, like lots of people, sure I swear sometimes. “Why do you ask?”

“Well the only people who don’t swear are preps, and you’re kind of dressed like a prep. I hate preps.” (In slacks and shirtsleeves purchased for this occasion, I was a bit overdressed.) Daisy swore gratuitously a couple times, watching me for a reaction. Amber, who I would
later learn almost never used strong language (but whom Daisy would not classify as a prep, either), winced. I didn’t, and that seemed enough for Daisy.

My training and research interests prepared me to expect language to be a strong marker of kids’ affiliation and differentiation, but I was surprised to encounter this early and directly such a challenge to my own identity and language use. I realized later that by catching me off guard and forcing me to make a public declaration that I do, indeed, swear, Daisy had set the terms of my role at HCS for the rest of the year, forcing me to declare an allegiance to the school’s kids rather than the adults. Through the rest of the year my unwillingness to censure students’ language, a hand forced early on by Daisy’s insistent challenge, regularly opened relationships even with kids who themselves may not have been regular swearers: they’d start upon hearing a friend swear in my presence, gesture meaningfully toward me, and relax only when informed that, “it’s okay, he doesn’t care.” Daisy’s question, which might have seemed challenging or hostile, was also a way of opening a door to let me in, something that I couldn’t really do without this sort of prompting. And it pointed to a very real experience of everyday suspicion, watchfulness, and surveillance as kids’ monitored their own and their peers’ language to avoid adult censure and cultivate relatively closed communities of expressive practice among friends and peers. Swearing, in this context, was as intimate as sharing earbuds—it required a level of trust in one’s interlocutors, to whom swearers exposed themselves to potentially serious repercussions.

So a willingness to swear or not was a marker of some sort of oppositional affiliation, but the terms of that oppositionality can be further specified. Daisy’s question, “do you swear?” in part asked, “what kind of adult are you?” Every detail of language and behavior is
carefully monitored by adults in school—“literacy,” after all, is perhaps the central pedagogical focus of elementary public education—and Daisy legitimately desired to know whether she would have to be on guard in my presence. But when prompted, Daisy framed the available roles for me not as a choice between, say, an authoritative and uptight teacher and a “cool” adult, but rather through reference to definitively youthful categories: “prep” versus what I’d eventually learn Daisy would term “normal people” (Eckert 1989).46 These sorts of social categories can only really articulate to young people; it is not clear what an adult “prep” would be at all.

Swearing was a marker of a social identity that had clear relevance within an institutional context where expression is strictly and continuously monitored for “appropriateness.” But the identity that swearing marked—“normal people”—was limited to young people, and the irony of this is apparent: vulgarity, of course, is an expressive repertoire normatively understood to be the strictly monitored province of adults. Children swearing is simply and categorically “inappropriate,” but for Daisy, swearing was precisely how one would demonstrate her affiliation to particular groups of children. Recall the responses of the fourth-graders to Kidz Bop (chapter 2), when Heather said that Kidz Bop just removed the swears, not all the “inappropriate” material, to make the recordings “appropriate,” and all the fourth graders focused intensely on just how much swearing could be identified in “radio

46 In fact categories like “prep,” “jock,” or “geek” were relatively rare at HCS, and were really only used at all by the eighth graders. It may be that the strict social divisions outlined by Eckert (1989) and Milner (2004) among high schoolers are less well-established in middle school. Moreover, the small size of HCS would necessarily destabilize any strict categorizations, simply because there were too few kids to define adequate aggregate taxonomies. For the most part the eighth-graders would only use these terms when prompted—if I specifically asked them to name the social categories, they would come up with “prep,” “jock,” “normal people,” and “video game boys” or “geeks.” Daisy’s unprompted use of “prep” in this instance, then, seemed to highlight, to the extent of naming, the heightened emphasis on social belonging and identity that characterized this first day of school, when confronted with the newness of an overdressed adult ethnographer.
edits” and other cleaned-up versions of songs. In the rest of this chapter I explore how this apparent contradiction makes sense from a perspective that sees intimate communicative orientations defined dialectically with instrumental ones. From this view, vulgarity, and associated forms, can be understood as a classically childish genre. Noting that swearing is not an independently constituted expressive genre that in and of itself acquires this articulation to kids’ peer society, this chapter explores some of the suggestions that resonate from Daisy’s juxtaposition of her defiantly athletic swinging-while-sharing-earbuds and her confrontational performance of vulgarity. There is a fundamental connection, I argue, between modes of interaction that involve entertainment and media technology, like sharing earbuds, and modes of communication that locate participants as children within an institutional regime governed by adults—the former, that is, are a prominent form of the latter.

In the fall of 2008, after my full-time field work concluded, I returned to Heartsboro and sat in on Art Class, where the teacher was dedicating time during a couple of early classes to establish the rules and procedures that would govern behavior for the coming year. For the second and third graders she explained the “take-a-break” chair she had set up in a corner. She demonstrated the procedure, tapping herself on the shoulder and calmly, with an air of dejection, walking over to the chair, emphasizing quiet, orderly acquiescence. This sort of teacher-pretending-to-be-a-student routine will invariably elicit some sort of enthusiastic and uncontrollable response from younger students who thrill at the idea of adults as children. As the teacher walked to the chair, two (now) third-grade boys sang “WAH WAH WAH,” like the muted-horn “You lose!” music from a cartoon or video game. And before the teacher had a
chance to correct them, the whole class perked up in recognition of the appropriateness of the sound effect to the situation being acted out, and everyone raised their voices and pointed their fingers, “WAH WAH WAAAAAH.” The teacher talked over the kids, trying to point out how such a response from the class would probably hurt the feelings of a person going to the take-a-break chair (in this situation, the teacher herself). But as she talked, the first boy looked at his classmates and said, “Come on, on ‘three’—one, two, three,” and waved his arms to conduct the whole class together in shouting “WAH WAH WAAAAAH!” The teacher continued calmly to settle the class as individuals repeated the melody, laughing; third-grader Jake said, to no one in particular, “I think it sounds like a video game, like when you get a gutterball.” The kids all laughed at how appropriately the familiar musical trope from media was applied to this real-world situation, taking pleasure in their “competent” performance. They collectively defied and thus undermined the teacher’s immediate instructional point thematizing quiet and order in response to discipline. And in ganging up as a class to point fingers and ridicule, they performed a familiar and not-so-savory aspect of the peer solidarity they cultivate so assiduously.

On another occasion, during a social studies lesson on the Civil War, the seventh- and eighth-grade teacher asked the class, “what did the South do in response to Lincoln resupplying Fort Sumter?” Before anyone could raise their hand and be called on, seventh-grader Willy piped in loudly: “They were like, ‘nooooooo!’ ‘arrrrrgh!’ ‘NINJA!’ and they attacked them!” With this outburst, like the second- and third-graders sound effects, Willy was not simply being silly and responding with non-sequiturs (though he was partly doing that), and he wasn’t just bringing a comfortable repertoire to bear on uncomfortable material
(though he was partly doing that also). Rather, he did something socially and interactively more powerful: he reframed the class material in terms of the spectacle and narrative structure of video games, comic books, and children’s TV shows—in which anger and incitement to violence might trigger the transformation of an ordinary person into a superhero with such sound effects (think the Incredible Hulk), or the assumption of a “ninja” identity to address a fighting scenario. He playfully imbued the Civil War actions with the character motivations and plot characteristics of entertainment narratives that are particularly relevant to children’s media. And he reframed the teacher’s third-person “initiation” with a “response” performed as dramatically reported speech, in which Willy himself spoke in the (narratively heightened) voice of the Southerners. Thus Willy replaced the characteristically decontextualized frames of classroom IRE interactions (Poole 2008) with a communicative immediacy that links to both spectacular narrative media and characteristically childish noise and vocal play. Later during that class the teacher listed some Civil War vocabulary words on the board—“Union,” “Dixie,” “Confederate”—and when he got to “blue” and “gray,” Nate shouted out “blue versus red!” Nate’s friend Sam piped in “Blue versus Red! Kill the Reds, Kill the Reds!”—quoting lines from a popular Internet cartoon made using footage from the even more popular video game Halo.47 Like Willy moments before, these boys rearticulated the IRE classroom interaction in order to share an enthusiastic (and intimate) wordplay with one another.

In this instance, the teacher knew better than to get distracted by challenging Willy’s outburst for its inappropriate form, but neither did he acknowledge that Willy’s response

47 Making movies with video captured from video games is called “machinima” (“machine” + “cinema”) and is an increasingly common form of cultural production (Berkely 2006; Jones 2006; Lowood 2006).
was, essentially, correct: the South responded aggressively to Lincoln’s resupplying Fort Sumter. Rather than acknowledging Willy’s demonstration of content mastery, the teacher simply ignored it: arranging, as Ray McDermott phrases it, “to hear less of his ‘request for action’ and to defuse any situation where it might show up” (1988:50), and thereby institutionalizing the official non-recognition of such ways of speaking as “inarticulate”—a term that I will develop in detail throughout this chapter. Another way to phrase this is to say that Willy prominently displayed what Rampton identifies as a “commitment to school knowledge often combined with a lack of regard for procedural decorum managed by the teacher” (2006:31). Content and knowledge, for both the teacher and the student, seemed to take a back seat here to disputes over procedure, decorum, and appropriateness.

Thus the classroom was less a space for imparting expressive ideologies to children than it was a site of continual contestation between repertoires of sound and expressivity governing when, where, and how noise, talk, and media use would frustrate or facilitate the goals and procedures of classroom instruction. Such contest was a prominent, audible force in the social organization of school, yielding a dynamic tension between peer sociability, consumption, and instruction to produce the complex, stratified, and mutable orderings of kids and adults, friends and peers, girls and boys, and older and younger. The power relations between kids, schools, and media played out in everyday interactions, where “silly” and sociable vocalizations overlapped with and incorporated entertainment forms from MP3s, the Internet, video games, and broadcast media, challenging communicative repertoires learned and enforced in the classroom.
I want to connect such moments in which media-related sounds intervene in the classroom lesson to what McDermott calls “mutterances”: “the occurrence of apparently disruptive, disorganized, or otherwise nonsensical moves on the parts of the children often precisely at the moments when it is their turn to perform some task: moves such as a whine, a curse, a scream, a burp, a gaze away, a silence, something in the eye, a wisecrack, a complaint; tasks such as answering, getting a turn, taking a turn, reading, or simply showing attention” (1988:48). Examples like those above, or the kids in Rymes’s scenario who share a pun about Pokémon characters in the middle of a phonics lesson, suggest that the nonsensical moves McDermott points to very often—though certainly not always—have specific content beyond the social power of their interruption, and that content, in many cases, comes from entertainment media. Kids’ expressive and communicative culture points to a strong link between entertainment media and the ideological construction of childhood as an oppositional identity.

As forms of interaction, kids’ modes of listening are constitutive elements in their repertoires of expression. As the examples in the remainder of this chapter demonstrate, a distinction between active and passive expression breaks down immediately upon analysis; instead, music listening turns out to be precisely a mode of communication like swearing. All of these elements comprise a larger expressive repertoire that I will argue in this chapter can broadly be characterized as “intimate.” Intimacy, in the sense I outline in chapter 2, is only intelligible as part of an even broader ecology of school communication in which it is dialectically opposed to instrumentality, and I point to two constituent elements of these intimate forms which are themselves important elements in the co-construction of school and
childhood. The first, “inappropriateness,” has been suggested in the preceding discussion of swearing. “Appropriate” and “inappropriate” are ubiquitous terms in school, and they are by far the most common frame for evaluating behavior. Like swearing, inappropriateness is constituted negatively, as a rejection of school or adult guidelines for communication, but also affirmatively, as a positive expression of some characteristic childishness. The second element, following McDermott, is “inarticulateness,” which is connected to vulgar forms like swearing and is similarly defined in opposition to many of the communicative specifications of the classroom, but nonetheless involves a unique and creative repertoire of interactional modes.

Inappropriate

A key form of “inappropriate” expression at HCS involved MP3 players and earbud-sharing, for the simple reason that earbuds allowed kids to listen to music with explicit language that would otherwise be forbidden at school. For instance, one morning in January, Kathy explained to me that she decided not to bring her iDog speakers to school because too many of the songs on her MP3 player were “unedited”—that is, full of strong language that had not been edited out into a “clean” version. It would be pointless to bring speakers to school, because listening to such unedited music on them would only invite censure from surrounding adults.

A prominent example of the power of portable music devices for private, or “underground” (Hubbard 1989) communication among intimates took place one day in March. That morning, as I stood by the stage with a few second-grade boys gathered around
a Game Boy playing a Pokémon game, two sixth graders, Kelly and Melissa, broke off from a large group of girls and worked their way across the crowded court, confidently stepping up and saying hi to me. They pushed their way in front the second-graders to talk to me, and the younger boys’ group broke up and went in search of a ball to play with. Kelly remembered that Megan had not heard the “Discovery Channel” song (actually “Bad Touch” by the Bloodhound Gang), so Kelly gestured to Becky to get out her MP3 player. Becky carefully unwound the cord and passed the earbuds to Megan, as she and Kelly bent over the LCD screen to find the song. As it played, Kelly reached out to take one of the earbuds from Megan and listened along. Melissa piped in from the edge of this group, to ask me if I knew what the song is about, and Kelly responded for me by quoting the chorus, “do it like they do on the Discovery Channel.” Trying to wink and nod, and to avoid directly acknowledging the word play and innuendo, I said, “Oh, ha ha, I can guess.” But Melissa did not think I got the reference, and confidently told me, “No, you have to hear the song to get it.” Kelly quoted a lyric really fast that I did not understand, from the chorus, presumably, and with a significant look Melissa chimed in that “It’s about mammals—mammals.” In the meantime, Amber and Alice had wandered over to join this emerging group. Alice pulled out her own MP3 player and passed an earbud to Melissa. Amber popped up onto the stage to sit quietly and I turned to chat with her. So there were six girls, two players, four earbuds, eight ears (figure 6). Shortly it was time for class.
Later that day at lunch, I sat with Melissa, Becky, Kelly, and Daisy. Kelly (who led her friends more through gregariousness and initiative than popularity or consensus) took this opportunity to educate me about the “Discovery Channel” song, again gesturing to Becky to unwind her MP3 player. Kelly took the earbuds and handed me one, keeping the other for herself—so now I was in the same configuration as Megan was this morning, with Kelly “showing” me a new song on the MP3 player owned and held by Becky. The song has a long instrumental intro, and Becky asked repeatedly, “Have the words started yet?” Kelly, listening, said “No,” and Becky expressed a bit of nervousness in anticipation, because, as I was coming to understand, the lyrics might not be appropriate for adults.

When the singing finally did start, Kelly informed Becky, who groaned and blushed. In fact, the words are pretty explicit:
Sweat baby sweat baby
Sex is a Texas drought
Me and you do the kind of stuff
That only Prince would sing about

So put your hands down my pants
And I’ll bet you’ll feel nuts

... 

I want you smothered want you covered
Like my Waffle House hashbrowns

Come quicker than FedEx
Never reach an apex just like Coca-Cola stock
You are inclined to make me rise an hour early
Just like Daylight Savings Time

You and me baby ain’t nothin’ but mammals
So let’s do it like they do on the Discovery Channel

Daisy, next to me, gestured to Kelly to let her listen, so Kelly handed over her earpiece, and Daisy and I listened through the first verse and chorus. I had trouble following the song and the talk, and missed some of the more explicit lines (“stick your hands down my pants”), while Kelly, Melissa, and Becky laughed as they repeated the name, “Discovery Channel” and the “nothin’ but mammals” line. Daisy monitored this talk while she listened, correcting them every time they called it the “Discovery Channel” song: “It’s called Bad Touch.” When I asked where they got the song, Becky sheepishly told me she “stole” it from her parents.

As Becky and Kelly looked at me expectantly and with some embarrassment, I realized just how explicit the song was, and that despite having not really said anything at all, I seemed to find myself in the midst of a rather graphic discourse about sex. Despite the title, I was caught off guard, and embarrassed myself, when this song turned out to be as explicit as

it is, so I handed the earpiece back to Kelly, relieved to be back in my normal position, part of the (sometimes winking and nodding) talk and action, but not necessarily privy to the private channels of the girls’ headphones. At the same time I was surprised at how comfortably the girls initially were in including me in their appreciation of this song, though Becky, like me, seemed to quickly get embarrassed. While sometimes kids would hand an earbud over in response to my unending questions about what they were listening to, this was the first time that I was offered one unprompted.

Other songs that seemed to have as much interest for kids to make a point of having me hear them were 2007’s “The Gummy Bear Song,” by German act Gummibär, and “Barbie Girl,” the 1997 European bubblegum pop song by Aqua. Like “Bad Touch,” both are novelty songs, jokey and built around the gimmicky use of a “childish” candy or doll as a central image. Another favorite song was from a segment of the irreverent cartoon comedy The Family Guy that included the line “ding fries are done” sung to the ostinato melody of “Carol of the Bells.” I had had the students play “Carol of the Bells” on Orff xylophones for the holiday concert in December, and the synergy between that school-based lesson and a favorite television show led to the “fries are done” version being sung often throughout the winter. On the other hand, there were also songs with intensely sexual content—Akon’s “Smack That” and “I Wanna Love You,” for instance—that were listened to widely during the 2007–8 school year, but they were rarely talked about, and kids did not repeat and relish the lyrics the way Kelly, Melissa, and Becky repeated the lyrics to “Bad Touch” while Daisy and I listened. Similarly, the hit song “Crank Dat” by Soulja Boy, which, along with an accompanying dance was hugely popular at HCS and around the country in 2007–8, has as
its chorus the line “Superman that ho” (rendered in the “clean” version as “Superman that—oh!”). The dance step at “superman” involves leaning forward on one foot with arms spread wide, miming a comic hero flying through the air. But the lyrics seem to use “superman” in an extremely vulgar and misogynistic sense to refer to an explicit and humiliating sex act. Through meaningful looks, giggles, blushing, and whispering, a handful of seventh- and eighth-graders made clear that they knew about this sense of the term. For most of the kids this meaning remained obscure, so the song was only inflected with a nonspecific valence of impropriety, and it was really the reference to a comic book superhero that helped it fit comfortably in this childish milieu. Remix versions of “Crank Dat” circulated on the Internet, substituting other cartoon and comic characters—Spiderman, Batman, Spongebob, Casper the friendly ghost, Alvin and the Chipmunks. These led to new, vulgar meanings for those characters being created to fit, but again, HCS students’ enjoyment of these new versions seemed to derive specifically from a delight in the ironic inflection of childish images as potential expressions of vulgarity than as a simple interest in vulgarity as such.

The Bloodhound Gang’s whole oeuvre is particularly “childish” or “immature.” (The name “Bloodhound Gang” itself comes from a kids’ TV show on PBS.) Tossing around the catch phrases—“do it like they do on the Discovery Channel” and “you and me baby ain’t nothin’ but mammals”—despite Daisy’s repeated corrections that the song’s name was the (less funny) “Bad Touch,” the girls appreciated the cleverness of the lines as much as they reveled in the transgressive meaning, “savoring” (Tannen 1989:64) the complex articulation of sexuality through mention of animals, a canonical topic of school and childhood discourse, and the Discovery Channel, a television network that is particularly “child-friendly” and
educational. (Not to mention common brand names—Coca Cola, Waffle House—that kids would be familiar with, and playground games like “two-hand touch” football.) When Melissa pointed out that morning that “you have to hear the song to get it,” she underscored the idea that there was something to get, a punchline or pun that rearticulates mundane school topics with a sexually heightened poetics. This punning core is what made the song worth sharing, not simply its explicit content. In fact, with a few exceptions, the song is not properly “explicit”; it is full of punning innuendo, ribald and audacious in the length it goes to stretch its metaphors. Connecting this back to Daisy’s interest in swearing as a shibboleth for youthful belonging, explicit language is only of interest to kids once it is inflected as childish, which only takes place through wordplay and ironic inversions. Classic, adult visions of innocent childhoods are turned on their heads as material for a new and independent expression of childishness that uses the power of that expectation of innocence to enjoy its inversion even more. Ironic play with the tropes of childishness may be a key characteristic of kids’ understandings of childishness.49

49 By contrast with this humorous play with tropes of childishness, when the seventh- and eighth-graders were asked to read George Orwell’s novel Animal Farm in class, they uniformly hated it, and pointed to its “talking animals” as highly objectionable. One said, “It’s what my brother reads,” referring to her nine-year-old younger sibling (one of the fourth-graders who so enjoyed the anthropomorphic animals in the Kidz Bop video discussed in chapter 2). Their teacher later admitted to me that the book was probably too difficult for these students, and that it was the first time he had taught it at these grades. In my discussions with students about the book, they did not at all seem to grasp or appreciate the allegorical aspects of the novel (“Who cares if it’s political,” one said). But the childishness of talking animals was what they latched onto in their critique, as a ready source of scorn. Many of these kids were friends and intimates with the sixth-graders who enjoyed “Bad Touch,” and I would not want to suggest that their slight age difference accounts for their dismissive attitude toward tropes of childishness. Rather, I would argue that the source of humor in “Bad Touch” is the same as the source of scorn for Animal House: childishness is charged with meaning and fraught with implications about respect, authority, self-worth, independence, etc. This makes it a source of power when initiated by children, but charges it with the suggestion of disrespect or worse when coming from adults. (In this way, it is perhaps again suggestive of the authenticity through exclusion that often characterizes identity politics.) That the teacher would give these students a book about talking animals was a real affront to their sensibilities.
It is important to distinguish between this sort of punning and euphemistic sexualized content and more literal or properly explicit songs about sex. Sexual innuendo is squarely part of what Sutton-Smith (1997) terms phantasmagoria: the fantastic, violent, sexual, gory, painful, punning, cruel, and gross elements of children’s culture. In chapter 1, I argued that phantasmagoria is a “master trope” of childish expressive traditions. Sexually suggestive rhymes and verse that use innuendo to thematize love, marriage, sex, and pregnancy have long histories in the singing and clapping games of children around the world: for example, “I jumped in the lake and swallowed a snake / And came up with a bellyache” and “Boys have got the muscles / Teachers got the brains / Girls have got the sexy legs / And here we go again” (Grugeon 2001:100). The snake-bellyache image of this rhyme makes use of tropes similar to those of “Bad touch,” where animals or childish illnesses (“bellyache”) clearly but euphemistically suggest phallic and sexual imagery. U.S. popular music has a long history of incorporating characters, themes, and texts from children’s literature and folklore into mainstream, commercial songs (Cooper 1989; K. Marsh 2006). That very similar ideas, built out of very similar repertoires of childish metaphors (“you and me baby ain’t nothin’ but mammals”), are here mediated through technology and popular music has two contrary effects. On the one hand, whereas playground rhymes might be disseminated entirely through peer-to-peer networks of children, here the mediations of commerce and technology implicate adults—the rock-star members of the Bloodhound Gang and presumably amoral, profit-seeking Hollywood corporations—carrying suggestions of improper “influence” since media and popular culture have long been the subject of moral panics about childhood (not to mention the parents from whom the recording was surreptitiously copied). On the other hand,
as the girls passed earbuds among their group, savoring the innuendo of obscure lines about TV and animals that are only elaborated in the private channels of the headphones, they further complicated the layers of secret and public talk, official and unofficial discourse, open and underground channels of communication that characterize school (Hubbard 1989).

Here we can begin to see how generic or tropological considerations—“immature” and “inappropriate” songs that make use of specifically phantasmagoric and childish images—are linked to modes of communication and interaction. Identifying the cultural configurations enacted in the girls’ interest in “Bad Touch” requires pointing out the layering of communicative channels of talk and listening that accommodated such transgressions, and the girls’ ability to use their media devices to selectively cross boundaries by, say, including me and not other adults. Sharing MP3 players, then goes hand in hand with whispering and passing notes, such that children’s modes of communication are parallel and necessary to these punning poetics and play with childish tropes of animals and comics. Such inappropriate content depends on private channels of communication for its circulation, but the transgressive character of such content in turn charges those private communicative channels with a powerfully social intimacy.

On the other hand, the privacy afforded by headphones was only necessary in everyday school situations where adults would actively monitor and regulate the sounds kids and their devices made. So Melissa made a point of bringing her portable, battery-powered speakers along with her MP3 player to the eighth-grade graduation ceremony in June (held the evening before the last day of school). After the ceremony, her friends gathered around her and she played Alice Cooper’s “School’s Out” as loud as she could—an “inappropriate” song
that I, in my capacities operating the sound equipment, had refused to play over the loudspeakers, but in its way definitely “appropriate” to the occasion.

**Inarticulate**

In parallel with inappropriateness, the other intimate frame that organized children’s portable music practices might be termed “inarticulateness” (McDermott 1988). As the preceding example suggests, kids’ talk about the music they listened to was, more often than not, indexical or imitative. They might repeat notable phrases and orient their shared attention toward a song, but rarely would they discuss or describe the music they listened to in non-indexical, third-person terms. In chapter 4, I noted that Randy claimed not to even know the names of the songs he recorded from TV. Similarly, in the previous example, all the participants but Daisy persisted in calling “Bad Touch” the “Discovery Channel Song”—repeating the prominent funny phrase immediately audible in the chorus rather than acknowledging an otherwise unheard title. Labeling and describing are central characteristics of “essayist literacy,” and in this section I explore how discursive practices around popular music that avoid such tropes of decontextualization might be understood as intimate, childish interventions in an educational regime of instrumental communication.

In January I sat down with sixth-graders Kelly and Melissa for an interview. Melissa had brought her Ilo MP3 player—a brand made exclusively for Walmart—and it served as a useful prop. My recording of the interview includes constant low-level music from the earbuds resting on the table, and the conversation changed direction several times in response to the MP3 players’ output. I had been trying to think about popular music as cultural capital,
but the processes by which songs and artists took on currency among the kids seemed random and unstructured. I spent several minutes asking ill-formed questions about how particular music becomes popular among HCS students, and Melissa and Kelly were clearly getting frustrated. We were very friendly, and they were happy to get out of their silent-reading period to chat with me about music, but they were definitely not interested in using this free time to analyze the social structures that informed their taste. Kelly repeatedly personalized my questions about classic rock bands whose popularity I had been surprised by, telling me that she liked AC/DC and other bands because of her dad, whereas I was looking for answers about why so many students, regardless of their parents’ tastes, seemed interested in classic rock. By contrast, Melissa gave in to my questions with frustration in her voice, telling me that “people at the school who are interested in music tell each other, and then like they listen to it on like the radio.” By the tone of her voice it was clear that Melissa was just telling me what I wanted to hear, and she had no interest in thinking about the circulation of music in her peer relationships. Neither the pat abstraction and generality of this answer nor the specificity of Kelly’s references to her dad really seemed to address the particular mechanics of taste in peer culture that I was hoping to get at. I found repeatedly in situations like this that students were much more likely to have clear ideas about how music fit into their families than how it fit into their friendships.

So when a song by the band Evanescence began playing from Melissa’s earbuds, I tried a new approach, focusing on a specific situation. Melissa was a close friend of Daisy, an eighth grader, who she would spend time with outside of school, since they lived near one another. Both girls also shared a strong interest in Evanescence, and I asked if their interest might
correlate somehow with their friendship. Melissa flatly denied any connection between her friendship with Daisy and their shared interest in Evanescence—either that their shared musical affinity might reflect personalities compatible to friendship, or that their existing friendship might lead to similar musical tastes. As I asked her repeated iterations of the question, getting frustrated myself that her responses were increasingly reduced to monosyllabic nos and ums, Kelly interrupted to ask, “Who is—what is Evanescence?” (Kelly and Melissa were close friends, too, and Kelly’s lack of shared knowledge about music Melissa liked seems to support Melissa’s point that friendship does not or need not correlate with musical interest.)

Unlike her reluctance to answer my questions, Melissa responded immediately to Kelly’s question, handing her over an earbud. “This, ready?” She pressed a button to start the song over.

I interrupted, hoping that maybe this might be a (culturally appropriate) situation for getting Melissa to talk in detail about her music. “Wait,” I said to Melissa, trying to prevent her from pressing PLAY. “Can you describe the group?”

“Errr . . . rock?”

“Well, how would you explain it to Kelly if you couldn’t play it for her?”

But Melissa had already turned to Kelly and introduced the song as Kelly tucked the earbud in her ear, “Kelly, this is the best song ever—”

I objected, again, trying to get Melissa to talk about the music. Playing the song for Kelly would not produce the sort of discourse about music I thought I needed to record and analyze. I switched to my teacher voice, sharply: “Wait. Hold on. Stop. Before you press
play, I’m curious about this. What if you didn’t have your player right here, and she wanted to know what was Evanescence, and you had to tell her?”

Melissa gave me a withering look and sneered, “I’d tell her to go to Walmart.” To buy the CD. Kelly laughed loudly, recognizing that Melissa had put me in my place. My questions, Melissa suggested, had no correct answer. The situation I hypothesized, in which Melissa might have a reason to describe a band to her friend without benefit of a ready-to-hand device, was fantastical, and did not merit considering.

“You would just wait until you could have a recording of it.”

“Exactly,” Melissa said flatly, turning to get back to showing her friend a favorite song.

While for the most part the girls humored my pestering and uninteresting questions, when I finally tried to use my authority as an adult to compel Melissa to produce the sort of talk I was looking for, her response was quick and penetrating. We had long before established good will, even friendship, and Melissa’s barbed comment was not rude, no more than I was used to taking and giving in playful interaction. But I was nonplussed by her response: being unwilling to talk to even a close friend about a band without a recording seemed completely impractical, and I did not believe Melissa. My reply, “You would just wait until you could have a recording,” was incredulous, even a bit sarcastic. But Melissa doubled down. “Exactly.”

I want to emphasize the very different communicative strategies present in this exchange. On the one hand Melissa responded to Kelly’s question about a band with a quick and unselfconscious move to pass an earbud to her. By contrast, I was trying very hard to organize the interview around speech, and, in particular, descriptive, denotative,
decontextualized, and expository speech—essentially “essayist” discourse (Poole 2008; see chapter 1 of this dissertation). Hypotheticals like “how would you describe Evanescence to your friend” are characteristically “teacherly” (my question could easily have taken the form of an essay assignment). I tried to force a context on a situation that was not based in any actually occurring social situation (however plausible the imagined situation might be), with the sole purpose of eliciting a particular type of decontextualized, expository discourse. That the content of my goal involved popular music and entertainment rather than potentially more sterile topics of classroom teachers does nothing to change the structure and format of the discourse I tried to impose with this intervention.

Kelly and I both posed questions to Melissa about Evanescence, but we sought very different kinds of information, and we brought to the table very different discursive repertoires. I had spent months to this point observing the kids in their interactions, recording and participating in free-time talk with music and around music, and I hoped these more formal interviews would facilitate direct discourse about these peer cultural musical practices. But it had not occurred to me that kids might be unwilling, uninterested, or unable to talk about music—that such talk served no particular function and therefore had no real place in their peer culture. I did not consider that not talking about music could itself be a convention inscribed within the kids’ music consumption. Rather, the constant presence and availability of MP3 players made music listening a shared, and frequently unspoken element of kids’ peer culture.

This point merits emphasis. Kids did talk with one another about celebrity musicians, saying “I like so-and-so,” “he’s cool,” or “he’s hot” (i.e., attractive). But they almost never
talked about the actual content of media. Over the entire school-year, with my ethnomusicological focus almost obsessively attuned to “speech about music” (Feld 1984), I witnessed only a single spontaneous instance of speech that addressed music as an object: while Amber and Kathy listened to Akon’s “Smack That” while sharing earbuds on the playground, Amber said to Kathy, “that’s the part [of the song] I like.” Otherwise, like the girls listening to “Bad Touch,” kids were much more likely to repeat lyrics from songs than to objectify a musical element with a pronoun or other denotation. One element of this phenomenon is the trouble kids had using the names of songs to find them on the Internet or even on their own devices. To generalize, kids’ discourse about music was almost always indexical or mimetic (iconic), very rarely symbolic or decontextualized. The connection to classroom situations like Willy’s “ninja” sound effects is important: in that moment, though he did provide the decontextualized facts that answered the social studies question, Willy reframed those facts as reported speech, and inflected them with the emotional content and specificity through the prominent addition of sonic expressive tropes. He turned a request for decontextualized information into an opportunity for mimetic performance. The second- and third-graders, similarly, used the performance of sound effects to comment indexically on the social situation they were witnessing—so rather than a meta-discourse about music, they used music as a meta-discourse about the teacher’s performance of the consequences of rule-breaking. Jake’s comment that, “it sounds like a video game, like when you get a gutterball,” blurs this distinction somewhat, but, despite objectifying the music the class was making, his comment nonetheless took its meaning from the indexical connections between situation and sound effect.
With other media, like TV shows and video games, a similar logic held, in which kids
would commonly repeat or perform jokes from sitcoms or moments of gameplay, but less
frequently talked about the content of the shows or games. For instance, I played the flash
video game Tanks on the Internet site “addictinggames.com” with Nate one day. He beat me
handily, and each time his weapon exploded at my tank, he commented in a heightened,
chesty voice: “that was BRUtal,” and “oh man, I asSAULted you.” Again, like Willy or the
kids in Art Class, these comments did objectify the action in the game, but more importantly
the words like “brutal” and “assaulted,” pronounced in this emphatic way, took on an
expressive resonance that mimetically narrated the otherwise two-dimensional and
potentially boring game with a kinesthetic physicality and action. Boys, especially, had a
repertoire of words like this, all marked as outside of normal vocabulary, which they only
ever spoke with heightened expression, that they used to narrate the events in their lives to
one another.

To return to my conversation with Melissa and Kelly, music seems to be understood by
kids as ontologically immediate: a material presence in actually occurring social situations,
not an abstract object of discourse. Melissa’s statement that she’d tell Kelly to purchase the
CD at Walmart reflected a logic of immediate, materially available sound similar to that
which inspired kids like Sarah and Randy to circulate music among devices and friends using
speakers and microphones rather than copying digital files (discussed in chapter 4). The same
logic structured the interactions around the “Discovery Channel” song, when Kelly simply
“showed” me the song by passing one of Becky’s earbuds, and Melissa made it clear that
“you have to hear the song to get it.” And as I listened to the recording and the girls repeated
lines from the song, only Daisy attempted to clarify that the song’s title wasn’t the same as its refrain; but the other girls ignored her intervention. Though it did not necessarily come to the surface in everyday interactions, my interaction with Melissa and Kelly during this interview exposed an otherwise unstated but powerful commitment, something like a refusal of abstraction.

My questions to the girls may have been poorly designed, and it is tempting to analyze this interaction as an interviewer’s inattentiveness to culturally appropriate modes of discourse (Briggs 1986). But I don’t think it makes sense to understand Melissa and Kelly’s interactions in terms of a coherent and contained “culture” that they share as children and I lack as an adult. Poorly designed interview questions would not account for the fact that Melissa had such a competent, and subtle, repertoire for dismissing my questions and redirecting her attention to a demonstration of the music for Kelly. Instead, I want to emphasize that my line of questioning was exceedingly familiar as a mode of discourse, because it resembled almost exactly the back-and-forth, IRE interactions that teachers lead in the classroom—not at all unfamiliar or inappropriate to Melissa, but specifically undesired and rejected. Teachers regularly asked kids to produce unmotivated discourse about uninteresting topics, as exercises in literacy education.50

McDermott charges us to consider instances of “inarticulateness,” not as an absence of fluency, but as moments where particular discursive modes—which are usually naturalized within powerful institutions, like schools—are actively avoided or rejected. An unwillingness

50 The instrumental communicative approaches of interviewers may well be very similar to those of teachers; both positions seek to elicit particular kinds of talk from their subjects.
to speak can be a powerful act, even in situations of extreme powerlessness. Willis, too, points out how “inarticulateness” can be an active resource in school:

Part of the reaction to the school institution is anyway a rejection of words and considered language as the expression of mental life. The way in which these creative insights are expressed, therefore, is one of expressive antagonism to the dominant bourgeois mode of signification—language. In a real sense for the working-class the cultural is in a battle with language. This is not to reduce the cultural to anti-abstract behavior. It is to posit it, in part, as an antagonistic way of expressing abstract and mental life centered, not on the individual subject, but on the group: not on the provided language but on lived demonstration, direct involvement and practical mastery. ([1977] 1981:124)

Just as my attempts to elicit descriptive, denotative, expository language eventually lapsed into a clear expression of adult authority (a command: “do this language task that I’ve set you”), when Melissa responded in kind to my change in tone, her cutting reply clearly positioned her on one side of a discursive gulf that posed decontextualized, essayist communication against “lived demonstration, direct involvement, and practical mastery.” Earbuds, in their immediate, ready-to-hand accessibility as a tool for interaction, were like language—even obviating certain functions of language—and as such their use needs to be seen as part of a larger ecology not just of listening, but of communication and interaction.

Continuing to follow Willis, the point here is not to “reduce the cultural to anti-abstract behavior.” Rather, it is to see, as McDermott suggests, these moments of non-communication as instances of politically charged interactions between individuals with different access to the institutional resources of power and authority. The contrast between “talking-about” and “showing” is one that broadly maps onto “adults” versus “kids,” but these discursive modes are not preconstituted repertoires that naturally articulate to certain types of people. Rather, my own shifting position during this interview—as I variously inhabited one and then
another discursive position, eventually settling into a recognizable, teacherly, and inescapably politicized mode of IRE and hypotheticals—demonstrates how these modes exists as resources through which individuals orient in relation to one another. This sort of shifting orientation to modes of communication reflects almost exactly that laid out by Poole (and discussed in chapter 1) in a fifth-grade reading lesson, where the key distinction between peer-oriented and teacher-directed language use involved whether the communicative action was *framed* as fully contextualized or as abstract and decontextualized. By rejecting talking-about in favor of the intimate indexicality of sharing earbuds Melissa positioned herself clearly on one side of this opposition, and she situated me, with disapproval, in a teacherly role—just as Daisy positioned me on the side of “normal people” when she put me off balance and got me to admit to swearing on the first day of school.

More than just orientations to communication, we can see media and portable technologies embedded within this structural contrast between “considered language” and “demonstrations” that Willis points to as characteristic of a “counter-school” culture. Willis identifies this opposition as arising out of school and schooling, not simply a “natural” “working-class” mode, and by situating portable media within that framework, we can see how entertainment, unintuitively, takes on an institutional role in school. Not simply some foreign consumer entity that is imported into a coherent school culture, media and popular culture might be understood as *native* to schooling, insofar as they play a central role in structuring the expressive ecology of the entire school social system. With Walmart and shopping lurking in the shadows of this conversation, Melissa also suggested that big-box
stores are almost as ready-to-hand as the music devices and recordings you might buy within them, and certainly (if a bit ironically) more ready-to-hand than the sort of decontextualized language you might use to describe the music to be purchased there—despite being a forty-minute drive away from the nearest Walmart. On the one hand Melissa’s stance reflected a cost-benefit calculation of Hymes’s point that, “the cost, as between expressing things easily and concisely, and expressing them with difficulty and at great length, is a real cost, commonly operative, and a constraint on the theoretical potentiality of language in daily life” (1973:73). But on the other hand Melissa was not just expressing a hyperbolic calculation that the difficulty of describing Evanescence’s music would outweigh the chore of making a trip to Walmart; she was making a clear statement of her position, here-and-now, in school. As McDermott writes, “occasions in which people are left without words are systematic outcomes of a set of relations among a group of persons bound in a social structure” (1988:38), and by refusing words Melissa here positioned herself not outside of, but within a social structure in which a particular notion of articulateness is the key organizing trope.

McDermott’s idea of “mutterances” carries a suggestion of solidarity. His key example involves a sixth-grade African American student who says “Fuck you” in answer to a request to sit down, and at another time volunteers the nonsensical rhyme, “latitude an attitude,” in response to a question about geography made to the whole class. McDermott notes that the rest of the students were “beaming” (1988:52). Certainly the students Rymes sees punning “Chansey” for “chancy” are producing something not unlike a “mutterance”—articulate, but illegible from the perspective of an ESL phonics lesson—just as Melissa and Kelly have no trouble in communicating successfully with one another, despite their active rejection of the
frameworks I attempted to impose. There is plenty of content in such “inarticulate” utterances, and my focus here is to point out how that content involves, with remarkable frequency, entertainment media and consumerism. At least in school, entertainment is in every case either inappropriate, inarticulate, or intimate. Therefore it is not simply suppressed by the educational apparatus, but rendered largely illegible to and within schooling—all the better for the kids who cultivate solidarity (and all the better for the consumer industries, who cultivate kids cultivating solidarity).

In light of my arguments in chapter 1, I think we ought to understand inarticulateness not simply as opposition, which seems to be the extent of McDermott’s analysis, but also as intimacy. Melissa and Kelly’s rejection of my instrumental, decontextualizing questions in favor of immediate, material, and audible listening involved a turn not simply away from the adult across the table, but toward another kid—a move that, as Melissa’s reference to Walmart suggests, is profoundly mediated by consumer products.
Conclusion

Kids’ rules

Kids proposed their own basis for authority in opposition to adult rulemaking. In Art class the day after the “wah wah wah” episode, the teacher asked the sixth- and seventh-grade students to help her compose a list of rules to govern their behavior for the year—a standard method for getting kids to take ownership of the classroom order. Going around the circle, each kid “passed,” declining to volunteer a rule—asserting a lack of fluency in this discourse, perhaps—to the teacher’s frustration. Finally Kelly said, “Our rules don’t fit with your rules,” fundamentally objecting to the exercise. I jumped in to point out that neither Kelly nor anyone else had actually proposed any rules, so how could we know that they might not “fit”? Kelly shrugged: “Well we don’t really have any rules . . . or our rules are just do whatever you want.”

In my time at HCS I heard mention of “kids rules” on numerous occasions. The only consistent thing about “kids rules” seemed to be that kids got to tell adults what to do (this was usually invoked to get me to do their bidding in some mischief). But, as Kelly’s comment made clear, it was not that she and her classmates had in mind some list of rules they claimed as “ours” that would not “fit” those the Art teacher would presumably require (after this obvious charade of an exercise). Rather, “kids rules” was inherently contradictory, because its substance was a committed lack of actual rules—an anti-classroom, anti-adult, anti-structure framework where kids could “authentically” be kids in unstructured peer interactivity: “our rules are just do whatever you want.” Of course, kids’ peer interactivity
was structured by various scripts, routines, expectations, “rules,” etc. But like “essayist literacy” which claims decontextualized language for itself despite the constant presence of contextual cues (successfully excluding the “wrong” types of contextualized language), kids posed a vision of rulelessness in an institutional context explicitly and constantly organized by innumerable rules.

Kids “rule” when they join together as a class to vocalize a soundtrack that reframes their teacher as a hapless cartoon character buffoon. And kids rule when they reframe their social studies lesson as a spectacular narrative with characters whose emotional power is expressed through dramatic vocal sounds. Kids rule when they listen together to music that is inaudible by surrounding adults, but whose content is spectacularly inappropriate for school. Kids rule when they sneak media devices into class, and show off to their friends that they got one over on the teacher, again. Kids rule when they reject the very premise of an adult’s question and turn to one another, instead, to communicate by means of the ready-to-hand material of their consumer media devices. Kids rule when they tell an adult with a straight face that it’s more convenient to go to Walmart and buy a CD than to perform acts of essayist literacy on command. Kids rule when they put dismissive adult figures like Russell Brand or Kanye West in their place, and force them into groveling apologies. And “Kids Rule!” was of course the slogan of Nickelodeon’s triumphant revisioning of child audiences for cable television. Marketing mottos like “let kids be kids” (the Chuck E. Cheese chain of restaurants, famously, is “where a kid can be a kid”) suggest that some quality of being a kid is absent or forbidden in homes and schools, and needs to be set free. Kelly’s “our rules” contains the
suggestion of some set of practices or expectations authentically “ours,” authentically childish, or better, kid-ish.

So Kelly’s version of kids’ rules was not specifically connected to consumer practice, media, or entertainment. But hopefully from the material in this dissertation it is increasingly clear how consumer practices in school fit into such an oppositional framework. By emphasizing relationships with friends, and by articulating those relationships as a form of solidarity, kids at school are doing something very similar to what is happening in the media with the children’s entertainment industry: they are framing themselves as a group with an identity, an identity with public, and political, implications: a counterpublic.

**Social capital and cultural capital**

In this dissertation I have not attended so much to the content of the specific music kids listen to or produce. Rather, I have focused my attention on the structure of interactions and practices in which kids listen to or produce music. Such a distinction between content and structure only holds intermittently, and linguists and anthropologists have demonstrated how the structure of discourse embeds and constitutes structures of interaction (Silverstein 1976; Urban 1991). The distinction I am making might better understood as between music listening as cultural capital and music listening as social capital (Bourdieu 1984). In its role as cultural capital, knowledge of artists, genres, and songs maps onto social status. But as social capital, listening to music involves not so much acquiring expertise as acquiring and solidifying relationships. Social capital is what is ultimately at stake in expressions of solidarity. Cultural capital and social capital are potentially fungible and in the right
circumstances (or the right marketplace) can be converted from one to another. The example of Melissa and Kelly in the previous chapter demonstrates this well, I think: Melissa was decidedly unwilling to consider whether the interest in the band Evanescence that she shared with Daisy was a form of cultural capital that they both acknowledged in one another. But presented with the opportunity to reject a particularly structured social interaction dominated by me, and to initiate a new connection with Kelly sitting next to her, she jumped on it, and that reestablishment of her friendship with Kelly in contrast with the authoritative relationship I was putting forward could, then, perhaps, be converted into cultural capital in the form of Kelly learning “what is Evanescence.”

I would argue that for the most part music scholars understand music from the perspective of cultural capital, and see its social force in the potential for converting that capital into social status (which was clearly my goal in the line of questioning about Evanescence and Daisy). By focusing on such practices as sharing earbuds, in which to a large extent the actual music playing on those earbuds seems deemphasized if not altogether unimportant to my account, I would like to say that I am pursuing the same project from the other direction, i.e., identifying how music listening built out of social capital might be translated into hierarchies of taste, or cultural capital. But the truth is, I simply do not see very much evidence among the kids I work with that hierarchies of musical taste play more than a middling role in establishing hierarchies of social status: Melissa certainly did not devalue Kelly’s status when she admitted to not knowing Evanescence, and Kelly never became a “fan” of Evanescence after being introduced, which we might expect were such taste a marker of cultural capital.
Rather, it makes more sense to me to understand music at HCS as a relatively undifferentiated medium for conducting social relationships. That is not to say that kids were not aware of or sensitive to issues of genre and taste in general. But for the specific question of how music practices participated in the social organization of school, it mattered much more whom one listened with and how than what one listened to—and in very many cases co-listeners were selected in spite of different tastes in musical genres, which were no more than trivial markers of peer group membership. Therefore, the key example in this text, sharing earbuds, is best understood as a practice in which music listening articulates and consolidates social capital. From a wider perspective, while musical taste largely did not seem to stratify kids from one another, it certainly did serve as capital for differentiating them from adults—in which childish and “inappropriate” content was understood as categorically distinct and opposed to educationally “appropriate” content.

This point is relevant to education scholarship. Many scholars of education who have addressed popular culture and argued for its useful pedagogical application have treated children’s popular culture as a sphere of cultural capital—of widely shared knowledge, taste, and interest.\textsuperscript{51} While much of the material in such educational literature does address friendships, family relationships, and social interactions as important elements, the theoretical and interpretive emphasis is more on textual material, imagery, tropes, and knowledge of popular or consumer culture. Thus Rymes’s analysis of the “Chansey” incident (discussed in chapter 2) is initially framed in terms of zones of competence, or fields of

\textsuperscript{51} Lefstein and Snell provide a more recent, contrasting approach that looks to “discourse genres” (2011). The discussion in this paragraph and the following is meant less as a critique or even generalization about literacy studies than to use examples from literacy studies to clarify the analytical distinction between cultural and social capital.
cultural knowledge that students have distributed access to. Similarly, when Dyson asks critically, “where are the childhoods in childhood literacy?” she suggests that a key aspect of “childhood” is popular cultural knowledge as a site of intertextual reference in student writing (2001). Marsh explicitly describes children’s play with electronic toys as an important site of acquiring cultural capital, recognizing that skillful knowledge of technology and media are markers of social status (J. Marsh 2002), and she emphasizes cultural capital as the particular form of capital relevant to literacy education (J. Marsh 2006; also J. Marsh and Millard 2001). There is no question that knowledge of popular culture and media does form precisely such a repository of cultural capital, whose textuality makes it particularly relevant to music and literacy education. But by noting the same theoretical and interpretive emphasis on cultural capital rather than social capital that we also find in music scholarship, I think we can identify opening for moving toward an even broader and more satisfying understanding of how children relate to learning and to one another in schools.52

My emphasis here on social capital is intended to move away from a focus on the knowledge and skills that children acquire or don’t acquire in school, and toward a perspective that sees social relationships in school as fundamental to understanding the various practices of schooling. Hence my interest in earbud-sharing as a key practice that points to how media use involves not just taste and knowledge but also specific interactions and configurations of individual people in a social and institutional context. Notably, a focus

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52 To be, perhaps, more critical, I think an educational perspective on popular culture as cultural capital suggests a problematic view of learning as knowledge transmission that is common in schools; hence proposals that teachers should make an effort to include popular cultural materials in their lessons, so that students can apply the same knowledge-acquisition techniques to those materials as they do to traditional classroom content. I find theories of learning as membership in a community (Lave and Wenger 1991) to be more persuasive—and I toy with the idea that the notion of “learning” itself is a problem (McDermott 2011)—which fits with the social capital analysis I am proposing here.
on musical activities seems to encourage such an interest in interaction over textuality, which is apparent in movement in music education to move toward a critical, ethnographic understanding of children’s musical practices, in parallel to the critical ethnographic interventions in literacy scholarship by Dyson and others. This music education research often focuses on children’s playground songs and hand-clapping games, which means that discussions of composition, intertextuality, and innovation are always necessarily grounded in embodied social interactions between individuals in social contexts (especially K. Marsh 2008). Textuality and writing practices, on the other hand, partly because an “essayist” ideology is so ingrained in education, can be a struggle to write about in terms of interaction, friendship, and social relationships. (Essayist literacy as social capital would be about articulating distant, mediated relationships with unseen readers, made possible by the essayist emphasis on silent, concentrated, and decontextualized individual writing.) The opposite is true with music, which a quick look suggests is commonly about individuals sharing space and coordinating their movements with others. But friendship is potentially more destabilizing to education than are new fields of content. The social relationships, and social capital, of friendships make possible a sort of politicized solidarity that, by its very constitution in face-to-face intimate relationships, can’t legitimately be subjected to the authority of schooling.

**Education versus consumerism**

I don’t think that we can understand children’s uses of portable media in school without a larger theoretical intervention regarding the relationship between education and
consumerism. In addition to hierarchical distinctions between children and adults—groups of
different (and always unequal) status—there is no reason we cannot see horizontal
distinctions involving opposition or conflict between institutions or industries that are not so
easily plotted in relation to one another on a graph of distinction. Education, according to
theorists like Willis, Foley, and Eckert, is a site of capitalist reproduction of social difference
from generation to generation. Though framed largely as critique, that view need not be seen
as controversial: commonly stated goals of education policy, as well as common sense and
everyday discourses, see the role of compulsory universal education as producing a future
labor force, and this is even more true in contemporary neoliberal discourses that emphasize
“human capital” as the key to future growth. That education is a central element in a
capitalist society is a truism, but it is no less true for that.

This view of education is about producing labor, not about consumption at all.
Consumption, as a central aspect of capitalist expressive practices, seems like it also ought to
be tied up in the instrumentality that Willis and Foley identify as so fundamental to bourgeois
life, but, instead, consumption is generally coded as intimate. For instance, Binkley writes
that, “within the experiential domain of consumption there persists a tendency toward
expressive as opposed to instrumental action, to the imaginary associations of desire and
fantasy as opposed to the objective, calculating interests that prevail in the professional
realms of work and productivity” (2006:352). From this, if we were to take the social class
model of instrumentality too seriously, consumption as non-instrumental (and
phantasmagorical) would be keyed as minoritized or working class. Noting the fact of
bourgeois consumption, that’s clearly not exactly correct, though we do have Warner’s
suggestion that “minoritized subjects . . . carry their unrecuperated positivity into consumption” (1992:384). Moreover, consumption as characteristically childish is a view that has strong proponents (Barber 2007).

Education, in particular, is implicitly and explicitly understood as somehow contrary to, even contradictory of, consumption, in part through its pervasive cultivation of instrumental communication. That view can be seen perhaps most clearly in critiques of advertising and marketing in schools (Manning 1999; Schor 2004), which suggest that bringing advertising into schools contradicts the mission of schools to safely nurture children’s development partly by protecting children from the potential harms of public commerce (Schor 2006). But an analytical division between education and consumerism may not be sustainable, as the growth of “edutainment” as a commercial and educational phenomenon suggests (Ito 2006). The increasing presence of marketing in schools has occurred in parallel with an increasing adoption by educators of the tropes of entertainment as a potential source for motivating student learning, along with the increasing market outside of school for media and entertainment that are presented as fostering specifically educational goals. There’s an irony here, in which commerce is widely understood as “dangerous” to kids, but is simultaneously represented as somehow authentic or native to childhood. This is demonstrated in the ubiquitous discourses of “digital natives” (Thornham and McFarlane 2010; Prensky 2001; Palfrey and Gasser 2008)—where children, precisely those who ought to be protected from the influence of media, technology, and commerce, are understood as fully “native” to commerce (Langer 2004). Hence Cook’s repeated point that children’s consumer culture is

Ito argues that an “opposition between entertainment and education is a compelling dichotomy—a pair of material, semiotic, technical genres—that manifests in a wide range of institutionalized relations” (2005b:83; also 2009), which cannot be simply analyzed as an extension of bureaucratic, instrumental communicative practices. Instead Ito points out how pleasure and fun are joined with entertainment in opposition to education:

Pleasure and fun, whether for adults, youth, or children, is symbolically set off from the instrumental domains of work, discipline, and achievement, mirroring the cultural opposition between “active” production and “passive” consumption. Media industries capitalize on the discursive regime that produces play as a site of authentic childhood agency, in particular, mobilizing phantasmagoria as a site of regressive, illicit, and oppositional power. (2002:176)

Through an examination of “participation genres,” Ito’s approach fits into the model of interactive and expressive frameworks that I outline in the preceding chapter. For Ito, entertainment and education do not simply apply to fields of production or categories of texts; they also outline persistent and conventional practices through which people engage with media products and texts: “we recognize certain patterns of representations (media genres), and in turn engage with them in routinized ways (participation genres)” (2008:91). Phantasmagoric and spectacular textual characteristics of entertainment software connect to intimate social orientations: “All gaming titles in some way cater to a hankering for spectacle, which is a cornerstone of participation genres associated with entertainment media. Children are quick to recognize these forms of engagement as ‘fun’ and part of their peer cultural exchange rather than the achievement economy of adults and education” (2008:91:110). By contrast, Ito’s analysis of “how the genre of academic software plays out
in the everyday play of kids” points to the componentiality and decontextualization characteristic of essayist literacy, reproducing instrumental orientations even in progressive, process-oriented environments: “The focus on external assessment and the linear sequencing of the game encourages an orientation to accomplishing the technical conditions of success rather than deeper exploration of the problem domain. Even . . . where adults try to push kids toward exploratory and imaginative play, the kids quickly recognize the genre expectations of educational achievement” (2008:107–8). Thus educational media is analyzable as “instrumental” in ways characteristic of other school orientations to textuality, knowledge, and participation, while entertainment appears neatly linked to the characteristic practices and tropes of childhood intimacy.

If we understand the expressive economy of schools to project intimacy and instrumentality onto a vertical axis of social differentiation, producing the marked and unmarked pairs of child/adult, woman/man, black/white, working-class/bourgeois, we might be inclined to add entertainment/education to this list. But entertainment and education do not apparently relate to each other the way child and adult do, as marked and unmarked categories that calibrate a hierarchical spectrum. Rather, an orientation toward entertainment does not simply encompass an intimate turn to proximate friends or community, but to powerful global institutions of capitalism—not unlike schools:

When one adds media industries and high technology to the relational mix, the equation becomes more complicated . . . What constitutes an authoritative institution is a contingent effect of local micropolitics, where pop culture identification confers status in children’s status hierarchies and “fun” gets mobilized vis-à-vis adults as an authenticating trope of a “natural” childlike pleasure principle. This is not a simple story of adult repression of authentic childhood impulses but is a distributed social field that produces the opposition between childhood pleasure and adult achievement norms as a contingent cultural effect, subject to local reshapings. (Ito 2005b:100)
Thus, the same intimacies that position children in opposition to school produce affiliations with entertainment and technology industries, through the cultural logic of consumption.

**Childhood and schooling specifically problematize these boundaries**

Langer writes that, “what is crucial to the children’s culture industry is . . . the designation of childhood as a cultural space constituted by consumption” (2004). Insofar as constituting one space involves drawing boundaries with another, it is clear that in schools spaces constituted by peer culture and relative absence of adult oversight are simultaneously spaces whose sociality is notably full of consumption, and so spaces constituted by consumption are simultaneously constituting the classroom as instrumental or other, and vice versa. Skillfully crossing such boundaries from “carnivalesque” sites of consumption to spaces of work, home, school is a key task of “governmentality”—an ethical task of self-discipline:

> Consumers must be made up as people able to immerse themselves in the phantasmagorical transformations of the carnivalesque, without losing themselves entirely. But what is important is the boundary between these realms, and the way in which it is reproduced as itself an ethical program . . . As an ethic of the self, the boundary between carnivalesque consumption and everyday life is transposed from the spatial and temporal coordinates of real market places, consumption locales and leisure times, into a characterological feature, a relation of self to self, or a technique of governmentality. (Binkley 2006:355)

The energy schools put into forbidding noisy socialization as well as media consumption practices within classrooms, and fencing them off in playgrounds, lunchrooms, and hallways, might be understood as training precisely practices of crossing such boundaries, rather than as an attempt to train such practices out of children altogether. From this perspective, entertainment and consumer practices are not something foreign to schools that kids bring in
to interfere with the real mission of schooling, but they are a key element of schooling—perhaps not as schooling is explicitly understood by adults, but certainly in the underlying structures that actually organize schooling.

In fact, the particular institutions of childhood and school—which necessarily constitute one another, as I argue in chapter 1—problematicize the binaries of education and entertainment, work and consumption, public and private, at their core. “Childhood” is the social imaginary at the center of education (Austin, Dwyer, and Freebody 2003), but childhood dissolves public and private: children are at once the definitive private subjects, canonically located in the home (even the bedroom) and with no legitimate public role, and they are simultaneously the population most subject to public—governmental, bureaucratic—intervention (Boyden 1990; Stephens 1995). This is fundamentally a contradiction: children are canonically private subjects who need to be protected from potential dangers from the public, adult world, but it is precisely that vulnerability that makes “public” institutions claim access to childhood as a basic social good—thus governments can intervene into homes to protect children from abuse, and, more basically, governments institute compulsory schooling because successful childhoods are seen as a public, not private, good. But schools, still, are not fully public spaces. Schools regulate access to non-authorized adults, but more than that a basic element of school practice involves intimate “care.” This is especially the case for younger children, for whom relationships with teachers are normatively caring and intimate, but holds true even at older ages, where discourses and ideals of nurturing and caring remain common. The Habermasian perspective on language and communication would precisely see the sort of rational-critical language that gets produced in literacy
education as what happens in the “public sphere”. But that sort of “public” communication is happening in a space that is “protected” from public.

Ito’s framework in which “pop culture identification confers status” points toward a classic reading of media in school as a form of cultural capital, which is a compelling perspective. But I think the social capital involved in childhood friendships provides an even more compelling basis for understanding children’s investment in media and popular culture. Hey argues that at its core, children’s (especially girls’) friendship relationships problematize a “neoliberal” model of

subjects who exist outside of sociality, place, history, and almost time . . . social cyphers [who] have no families, certainly not friends, nobody except themselves and their individual “freedom”; a moral bleakness that is grounded in assumptions of the ubiquitous realities of new times individualization . . . there is a focus on instrumental relationships said to be characteristic of late modern forms of work. This has replaced an earlier more optimistic discourse about the political and emotional solidarity of industrial working-class male identity. (2002:228–29)

Instead, friendships are evidence that “subjects cannot simply evade the regulation that flows from interconnectedness, mutuality, and interdependence . . . Taken together, young people’s investments in the practice of compulsory sociability is so strong that no amount of neoliberalism is ever likely to overwrite it” (2002:239). In Hey’s account, friendship is a relationship that opposes what Foley would call “instrumentality” in its fundamental composition as mutual and interdependent—and friendships reveal the fact of interconnectedness more broadly in a neoliberal society.

But at the same time, friendship “draws so heavily upon the discourse of individual freedom. Historically, friendship premises itself on ideas about “choice” and uniqueness and it thus makes a particular claim on young people, since it appears as an ideal or first practice
of the ‘reflexive’ self . . . [Friendship] is lived by these young people as an ontology and epistemology of the self through the ‘other’” (2002:239). This “freedom” of expressive, intimate practice has remarkable parallels to the intimate freedoms of consumerism: “the freedom of the consumer is the freedom to transform the self by stepping back in thought, but the medium of such thinking is not that of instrumental planning but of something quite different—it is one of fantasy, play, distraction and imaginary escape” (Binkley 2006:351).

Further, it is not appropriate to say that friendships are simply “private”; rather, intimate friendships create their own publics in spaces like the playground or mall, as Eckert argues:

The crowd dominates the public sphere, partially inserting the private sphere into it. Heightened activity and style draw attention to those who are engaged in it, and makes their private affairs public events. In this way, they take on status as public people. This “going public” is a crucial component of the process of maturation taking place in this age group. Such things as girls’ trips to the mall, and gang-oriented territoriality, are primarily about inserting and viewing the self as an independent agent in the public domain. (1996:185)

Thus friendship, the canonically “childish” relationship at the center of peer culture, is a relationship structured in such a way that its intimacy is naturally opposed to schools instrumentality, while its emphasis on individual expression through sociality helps integrate consumption as an essential practice of friendship.

**School rules**

Friendship, insofar as it is constructed out of the intensity and intimacy of childhood relationships, configures the peculiarly intimate public spaces of school into a robust site for disrupting the privatization and isolation of individuals: friendship poses one system of social capital based on political and emotional solidarity among children in opposition to another,
based on individuality and instrumental communication. Adding the affective intensity of consumer media’s phantasmagoric desire to such destabilizing friendships, and items like MP3 players are *legitimately* threatening to school’s institutional authority, because they fundamentally reconfigure how the politics of school are understood, away from a legitimately hierarchical adult power and toward a more dynamic and essentially agonistic structure.

So, for good reason, teachers and administrators at HCS were suspicious of MP3 players, seeing them as distracting and disruptive (although since kids were proactive about avoiding discovery, I witnessed only a few instances of teachers actually catching a student listening in class). At staff meetings MP3 players were often listed with hats, soda, and chewing gum as objectionable objects that negatively influenced student behavior, and some adults proposed banning such items from the building, “so that the kids know they’re at school” (again, note the emphasis on spatial boundaries). On the other hand, some teachers disagreed with this view, arguing instead that there is (pedagogical) value in items like music players or chewing gum for helping students concentrate, and defending kids’ “free time” against proliferating regulations. But at the beginning of the 2008 school year, after my full-time fieldwork ended, students returned from vacation to a total ban on all portable electronics. (In fact HCS was years late in this development; most schools in the region had long forbidden such devices or never allowed them in the first place.) So, we might say, MP3 players and earbuds were ultimately subject to the unrelenting disciplining power of bureaucratic adult authority.
But schools regularly ban all sorts of things, especially such commercial and sociable “fads” as Pokémon cards or pogs—or MP3 players—through which kids turn their concentration intensely toward one another. Perhaps these cycles of fads and bans do not suggest repression so much as incitement (Foucault 1978) to the private, intimate, interactive, and playful practices that persistently characterizes children’s sociable peer culture in school. It is hard to see such instrumental adult interventions into kids’ listening as effectually socializing kids toward essayist habits of instrumental literacy (or rationalized habits of isolated listening); rather, by framing banned items as hidden, close, and intimate, they further articulate them to the marginal and subordinated peer sociability and intimacy—and to the particular affective modes of consumer practices—to which kids are so committed. Of course adult regulations are only ever partial, as practices like passing notes and whispering persist throughout continual adult attempts to manage kids’ illicit peer communications.

When I return to visit HCS, after the ban on portable media devices, it’s hard to identify much difference in the kids’ sociality without MP3 players, although without the colorful cables visibly diagramming kids’ social networks it sometimes takes a second glance to see friends leaning in to one another, intimately sharing space.
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