

The new 'tween' music industry: The Disney Channel, Kidz Bop, and an emerging childhood counterpublic

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This article has been accepted for publication in *Popular Music*, published by Cambridge University Press, where it will appear in revised form, subsequent to editorial input.
<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=PMU>

Revised October 2011

Abstract

This article examines the expansion of the U.S. children's music industry in the last decade. It considers the sanitizing of Top 40 pop for child audiences in the Kidz Bop compilations, the entrance of Disney into the popular music market, and the meteoric rise of "tween" music products such as High School Musical, Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus, the Jonas Brothers, and Justin Bieber. Children increasingly consume mainstream musical products and, in the converse dynamic, children's artists themselves play an increasingly prominent role in popular culture. In many ways they have taken the lead both in commercial success and in stylistic innovations. Examining public expressions of age-based solidarity among celebrity musicians associated with children, this article argues that children's music is increasingly articulated through tropes of identity politics, representing the emergence of a childhood counterpublic.

Over the last decade, children's music has been at the forefront of a remarkable transformation in the children's media and consumer industries. Children's musical products, once dominated by folk-singers and animated musicals, now sound and look increasingly like the mainstream pop aimed at youth and adult audiences, with sophisticated production values, professional songwriting, and talented and stylish performers, and the children's music industry has become a powerful force in popular music. Through these developments, age has emerged as a key marker of identity and affiliation that position the children's music industry, and children themselves, in a complicated role in media and public culture.

The history of commercial children’s music extends to the very first recordings (Tillson 1994, 1995) and earlier, to the music publishing industries in Europe and the United States (for just one example, see Kok 2008). In the twentieth century record companies quickly began to cultivate parents and especially teachers as a market for musical products (Dunham 1961), and since the post-war era there have been two main strands of music for children: unapologetically commercial entertainment music from large corporations such as Disney, whose successful model of animated movie musicals has been extended to include television, radio, and the Internet, and music framed as educational or enriching, from independent-label artists like Raffi and Tom Glazer, whose often explicitly anti-capitalist music has roots in the 1960s folk revival (Bonner 2008).¹

In this article I focus on the period 2005–2009, when the ‘tween’ music industry in the U.S. emerged as a major economic and cultural force. Beginning in the late-1990s, the dominant musical-theater and folk-revival genres of children’s music were superseded by an explosion of pop music for children. By 2005 pop music for children had become a significant area of growth in an otherwise struggling music industry, and brands such as Kidz Bop, the *High School Musical* movies, and the still-prominent acts Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus, the Jonas Brothers, and Justin Bieber topped numerous sales charts and had achieved mainstream—if fraught and uncertain—prominence in the music industry.

In examining the contemporary tween music industry, I have two aims. The first is to provide an overview of the industry, which to date has received almost no scholarly analysis. I identify in children’s music a familiar tension, characteristic of many fields of children’s consumer culture, in which constructions of childhood as a field of difference and marginality are paired with

¹ For an overview see Bickford (In press-a).

presentations of children as aspirational participants in dominant (adult) cultural fields, such that boundary crossing and ambiguity are the key tropes (Cook and Kaiser 2004; Banet-Weiser 2007). The second aim, which builds on the first, is to argue that in its very recent prominence in mainstream popular culture, the tween music industry appears to be pushing beyond this ambiguous logic, as children are increasingly presented with tropes of identity politics as an oppositional group who do not shy away from age-based conflict to consolidate their cultural and commercial status. Out of the ambiguous and tentative boundary crossings of a previous generation of children’s media, we appear to be witnessing the emergence of a confident ‘counterpublic’ (Warner 2002) of child audiences and performers.

In making this argument I build on the ‘new social studies of childhood’ (James, et al. 1998), which recognizes ‘childhood’ as a socially constructed category of identity that intersects with gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, disability, and sexuality (Prout and James 1990). This perspective acknowledges children as actors in their communities and agents in the production of their roles and relationship, and recognizes the political and commercial power claimed by and for children.²

Tweens

The category tween emerged in the early 1990s to identify a marketing demographic of young people ‘between’ childhood and adolescence—9–12 year old kids (narrowly, or broadly 4–15 years old) who might otherwise be called pre-adolescents (Cook and Kaiser 2004). The history of tweens coincides with a dramatic increase in children’s purchasing power: children directly spend tens of billions of dollars annually, and influence as much as \$200 billion in

² For an extended discussion of the importance of childhood studies to this project, and its implications for political philosophy and critical theory more generally, see Bickford (2011:29–37).

family spending.³ The cutesy play on ‘teen’ and ‘between’ reflects the significant insight that tweens embody the contradictions of separation and inclusion seen in television channels like Nickelodeon, whose mantra, ‘let kids be kids’ (McDonough 2004), framed children’s increasing status as media audiences as empowering them as a distinct and separate group (Banet-Weiser 2007). Letting ‘kids be kids’ entailed lots of phantasmagoria and coprophilia (Sutton-Smith 1997; McGillis 2003), characteristic tropes of children’s traditional expressive cultures, such that brightly colored slime, a signature prop from early in the station’s history, became iconic of the Nickelodeon brand.

While the category tween began as a further segmentation of the children’s market into finely graded age 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. With regard to 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 (von Feilitzen and Roe 1990)—but now brands like Kidz Bop and Disney market the same music to children as young as 4 and as old as 15 (or

³ Specific numbers are tricky to pin down, 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, et al. 2002) cite numbers from ‘marketing guru’ and retired Texas A&M professor James McNeal, who estimated a decade ago that U.S. children ages four to twelve directly spend more than \$20 billion annually, and influence another \$188 billion in family spending (McNeal 1999). Those numbers have almost certainly grown. A more recent report by MarketResearch.com using fall 2007 data claims that kids three to eleven had ‘income’ of \$19 billion (Brown and Washton 2008), and an earlier report claimed that kids eight to fourteen have direct buying power closer to \$40 billion (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 three to eleven (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 2005–2006, suggests a slight decrease in overall per-family spending on this 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 the data is not otherwise available except in raw from USDA and BLS.)

even older). What’s more, tween media increasingly stakes a claim on mainstream and adult audiences.

Children’s influence in popular culture

The expansion of the children’s media industry is often understood by marketers and media professionals as involving ‘children growing older younger’ (Montgomery 2007:20). Thus, MTV Networks executive Betsy Frank commented that, ‘If something works for MTV, it will also work for Nickelodeon’ (Schor 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 and more mature material, whittling away at the ‘childishness’ of childhood.⁴

Such a view assumes that the direction of influence is always downward, from older to younger. It also carries a suggestion that as children participate more and more in consumer practices, by necessity their activities will be more and more mature; if the public spaces of consumption are characteristically mature rather than childish, then child consumers naturally adapt to more mature content. But the converse argument is compelling: as children’s entertainment gains a firmer foothold, so do the characteristics and representatives of children’s culture filter even more broadly into mainstream popular and consumer culture. Not simply

⁴ Throughout this article I use the term ‘childish’ rather than ‘childlike’ or ‘children’s’ or some other term to describe characteristics of childhood. I am sensitive to 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). But rather than abolishing the term I am interested in repurposing it as a useful adjective. To the extent that it is possible to neutralize its negative sense, I hope to do so, but I also find that the residual valences of dismissal and denigration are an important reminder of the status of children and childhood in our discourse. In any event my use of the term throughout should not be understood to imply criticism or the suggestion of irresponsibility or irrational thinking, but at the same time I choose not to use sanitizing language to paper over the fact that children’s things are widely denigrated and devalued.

children adapting to a mature public sphere of consumption by growing older younger, the broader consumer world also adapts itself to the increasing presence of children, becoming childish in notable ways. In perhaps the most vociferous statement of this point of view, Benjamin Barber argues, contrary to the ‘growing older younger’ thesis, that 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).⁵

Media from several spheres point to the value of this argument. Nickelodeon is a case in point, where its presentation of childhood as authentically separate through tropes of camp, irony, and grossness had the effect of attracting adult audiences to the children’s channel (Banet-Weiser 2007:5). Another example is the priority placed on ‘cuteness’ in Japanese popular culture, which 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). According to Buckingham and Sefton-Green, the global success of Pokémon is part of a trend positioning ‘children’s culture in the forefront of developments in global capitalism’ (2003:396), especially through a (childish) emphasis on activity and social interaction. Similarly, we can extrapolate from Montgomery’s (2007) history of U.S. policy controversies around children and the Internet that childishness is a characteristic feature of ‘new media’: 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 explicitly

⁵ Though I find Barber helpful for stating this position clearly, I want to push back against this sense of the term ‘infantilization.’ Presumably a writer such as Barber would not use, say, ‘feminization’ in such a pervasively negative and unqualified sense. His use of ‘infantilize’ suggests a marked 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’). This is the uncritical usage of ‘childish’ to which Svitak (2010) rightly objects, and which I hope to move past in my own use of the term.

saw as the cultural norms of childhood (the same heightened sociality, immersion, and interactivity that make Pokémon both so childish and so widely successful). Innovative websites like Bolt.com specifically sought out young people 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. That configurations of the Internet originally understood as characteristically youthful have since expanded into ubiquitous adult use of social networking sites like Facebook further suggests that social practices that originate among children are increasingly central to the consumer culture of the new media environment.

This process plays out in a unique way in the children’s music industry. On the one hand, children increasingly consume mainstream musical products, sometimes directly, and sometimes repackaged by brands like Kidz Bop. On the other hand, children’s artists themselves play an increasingly prominent role in popular culture, and in many ways have taken the lead both in commercial success and in stylistic innovations. Not simply attracting adult audiences to their niche media, children’s artists are themselves colonizing very mainstream radio and television forums without shedding key elements of their childish presence. The bidirectionality of influence is key to the constitution of children’s popular music as a successful and growing field.

Making pop music childish: Kidz Bop

The brand Kidz Bop is a prominent example of how the economic success of music for kids is accompanied by a blurring of the lines between ‘mainstream’ and childish music. Kidz Bop sells CD compilations of Top 40 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 & Tie Media 2010). The top-selling children’s brand in the four years leading to 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 10 in the all-around Billboard album sales charts, becoming the second and third best-selling albums in the country.

Kidz Bop presents itself as 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 them, and for parents to be comfortable that it’s not as dangerous as everything that’s on the radio’ (McCarthy 2006). Kidz Bop describes its target age group as ‘kids who have outgrown Elmo but are not quite ready for Eminem’ (Pang 2006), citing the saccharine-sweet *Sesame Street* Muppet and the rapper who figured prominently 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 public participation are central to the construction of kids as active and engaged consumers. Kidz Bop’s intervention in making popular music ‘safe’ seems to involve surface-level packaging and framing more than substantive changes to the content of songs. The compilations avoid songs that would be unresolvably explicit, but that seems to be a small category (those songs already have limited 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 2005 Kidz Bop version unchanged (Harrison 2006).⁶ If the songs are only minimally altered for an audience of children, 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.⁷ 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

⁶ ’1, 2 Step,’ words and music by Phalon Alexander, Missy Elliott, and Ciara Harris. Copyright © 2004 Warner-Tamerlane Publishing Corp., Noontime Tunes, Bubba Gee Music, Mass Confusion Productions, Hitco South, and Royalty Rightings.

⁷ As of June 2011, the video can be viewed at <http://www.kidzbop.com/video/player/129>.

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 fantastically breaks through from play performance to the real thing, as 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, and 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 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.

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 in the video, 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 commercially more similar to car ads than to Top 40 radio only underscores the frequent marginality of children’s music. But unlike advertisements, where selling cars is the goal for which licensed music helps establish a social or emotional context, 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.

In 2007 I conducted ethnographic field research at a small elementary school in rural Vermont (see Bickford 2011), where I asked a group of 9- and 10-year-olds (the core audience for Kidz Bop and tween media generally) to watch this video with me. Their responses emphasized their enthusiasm for the childish imagery, but also emphasized the connections to mainstream music. 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, they 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 tried 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 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 family theme parks (or, as Jesse noted, 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 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’ (the term ‘person’ appropriately vague with reference to the celebrity singer or the hired stand-in) 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.’ (In fact 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 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 the same 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 the 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 characterizes the consumer construction of tweens—not so much one or the other, but both, simultaneously. In the following sections 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 not only a market demographic, but as a real cultural group constituted through circulation of counterpublic discourse.

Making children’s music pop: The Disney Channel

Centered on its cable television network The Disney Channel, the children’s media giant Disney has been a major player in the recent explosion of tween pop. The Disney Channel and Disney’s Hollywood Records label have produced three of the biggest music acts in the last few years. In 2006 the soundtrack to *High School Musical* was the top-selling album of the year, and the same year 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. 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, though the TV tie-in came later.⁸

The current ascendance of the tween-focused Disney Channel in Disney’s media ecology is relatively recent, and to my knowledge has not received attention in cultural studies or media

⁸ 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.

literature. So it is worth stressing that this Disney is very different from the animated movies and theme parks that have traditionally received scholarly attention (e.g., Drotner 2002; Giroux 1999; Götz, et al. 2005; Hunt and Frankenberg 1990; Telotte 2004; Wasko, et al. 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.⁹ Interestingly, television has long been a central mediator of children’s music experience (Lury 2002), and the intimacy and availability of TV in homes may make it uniquely suited for addressing child audiences. 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, kid-friendly Top 40 pop, novelty songs, and a selection of ‘oldies.’ Overall Disney’s pop music products are part of an integrated ‘media mix’ (Ito 2008) that includes CDs and DVDs, TV shows and feature-length TV movies, music videos, radio airplay, concert tours, and various consumer products, from toys to school supplies to clothing, all of which fit most naturally under the umbrella of the Disney Channel.

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). In a parallel move away from ‘schlock,’ Disney’s popular music offerings now stand out for their high production values and sophisticated songwriting, so that the recordings themselves are not readily distinguishable from standard radio fare. (To an extent *HSM* is an

⁹ Unlike other cable networks, including its main competitor, Nickelodeon, the Disney Channel does not advertise in the traditional way, interrupting its shows every twelve minutes or so to run 15- to 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.

exception to this, because it follows the conventions of musical theater more than Top 40 pop, so the songtexts are more earnest and the performances are 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 only minor adjustments to their sound and content, Disney led the way in making original music for kids ‘pop,’ largely just by adhering to the genre conventions of pop music, which had long been absent from children’s musical offerings.

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 spun off from a Disney Channel original movie, itself based on a series of ‘young adult’ novels. Their first record was released in 2006, around the time the hypersexual Pussycat Dolls were popular. It is hard not to see the similarities between the Cheetah Girls and the Pussycat dolls: both were multiethnic 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, the group is multiethnic, with an ‘urban’ style, and their music often has a Latin sound (as in the single, ‘Fuego’), following an early-decade trend where music by Latina/Latino artists like

Shakira, Jennifer Lopez, and Ricky Martin, with occasional Spanish-language lyrics, was popular.¹⁰ 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.

To the extent that Disney’s music is ‘childish’ it is primarily through the absence of strong language or explicit sexuality, 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). But references to childhood are not scrubbed altogether. The *Hannah Montana* show directly addresses issues 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). The theme song, ‘The Best of Both Worlds,’ specifically addresses this tension with a message of ‘having it all.’ The motivating ‘situation’ of the episodes involves the question of maintaining traditionally childish family and friendship intimacies despite Miley/Hannah’s public double life. In the style of a classic sitcom (Newman 2009), the show includes many jokes at the expense of the adult music world, as Miley/Hannah and her friends will act childishly (wearing costumes or disguises and getting covered in grossness, say) to the chagrin of uptight adults. The *High School Musical* movies

¹⁰ Though the Cheetah Girls, with their multiethnic membership and style, are especially prominent in this regard, almost all of the Disney Channel’s shows have multiracial casts, with, in some cases, minority actors cast in lead roles. The marketing logic appears similar to that of Nickelodeon, whose multiracial and multicultural images have been analyzed by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2007:142–77). Especially insofar as the term emphasizes forms of consumption that are coded bourgeois and feminine, tweens have always been presumptively white and female (Cook and Kaiser 2004). As it becomes more common the term may increasingly include boys, but it is less clear whether its presumptive whiteness is as open to change. For instance, Disney recently created a new channel to attract boys, Disney XD, acknowledging that the Disney Channel’s audience is largely girls, and it does offer Spanish-language versions of original-English content, but its products are not clearly intended to address a specifically minority audience. Kidz Bop, interestingly, emphasizes in its marketing literature that its audience is ‘geographically diverse throughout the United States,’ but notably does not claim to be *ethnically* diverse (Razor & Tie Media 2010).

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.’ These three acts are somewhat age-graded, with the musical-theater camp of *HSM* geared toward the youngest audiences, while the Jonas Brothers cultivated young teenagers, with Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus in the middle. 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 traditionally precise division of age-groups characteristic of children’s marketing.¹¹

The Disney Channel 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 the 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 appeared on major awards show in their capacity as *HSM* stars. Miley Cyrus no longer records as Hannah Montana, but the show continued to air new episodes through 2011, and Cyrus is still affiliated with Hollywood Records. The Jonas Brothers early success depended on marketing through the Disney Channel,

¹¹ Compare this to Pokémon, whose line of products include, ‘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 2003:382).

including guest appearances on *Hannah Montana* and starring in a Disney Channel–original movie, *Camp Rock*. 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 achieving widespread success and an apparently 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 childish Disney Channel identities (though Cyrus, as I note below, did encounter real challenges).

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 and partly through its creative emphasis on pop music, 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.

Age, gender, and sexuality

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 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 its boundaries are simultaneously sharpened and eroded.

Sex is a key issue, as it always is with younger celebrities and female celebrities (Whiteley 2005), and neutralizing sex as a possible source of controversy is a key component of Disney’s creative production. 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).¹² At the same time, Cyrus’s single ‘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 at the expense of her popularity with children and tweens (Holson 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 godliness. If she violates that trust, she won’t get it back’ (Barnes 2008). Compare that ‘business decision’ with a comment from an

¹² In 2008 kids in my research reacted less strongly to the *Vanity Fair* incident, expressing mostly indifference, rather than outrage or frustration, to Miley Cyrus, though they were also turning their attention to the newer Jonas Brothers.

editor at *US Magazine* in response to the TCA performance: ‘She already has this risqué image, so it really wasn’t much of a stretch. That’s how Britney [Spears] took off. She was the good girl gone bad, and it looks to be working for Miley as well’ (Kahn 2009). 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 (Lowe 2003). There does not seem to be any middle ground available to young woman artists between ‘godliness’ and the ‘good girl gone bad.’

The constant attention to and censoring of Cyrus’s public performances of sexuality are not simply about her youth and audience; impossible and hypocritical virgin/whore expectations are commonplace for adult women celebrities too (Fiske 1989; Dibben 1999; Lemish 2003). 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—which were also the subject of minor controversy.

Age-group conflict onstage

The tensions involving tween participation in mainstream consumer culture came to a head at the MTV Video Music Awards in 2008 and 2009, as adult and tween public figures shared the stage, embodying the conflicts that emerge as tweens increasingly occupy the limelight. 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. In this section I consider two incidents at the VMAs that seem to move beyond tween music as an expression of the classic formulation of

children’s entertainment, where fluidity, ambiguity, and boundary crossing are the norm. Onstage at the VMAs we can identify something stronger: an emerging group identity and solidarity among tween-oriented acts, expressed through explicit conflict and opposition. No longer simply about avoiding conflict and ameliorating adult concerns to legitimate children’s consumption, we can see tween media as a counterpublic field of conflict and opposition that presents children as a visible and powerful group.¹³

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

¹³ The events described in this section occurred at Paramount Pictures Studios in Los Angeles on September 7, 2008, and at Radio City Music Hall in New York on September 13, 2009, and were broadcast live on MTV.

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.’

The following year at the VMAs there was an even more prominent collision between adult and tween stars. Nineteen-year-old country-pop singer Taylor Swift’s first success came at age sixteen, 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 2009 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 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. 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 the popular Nickelodeon 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—was overwhelmed by Sparks’s reactionary application of the awful term ‘slut’ to Brand and, presumably, his ilk. And West, who seemed to be publicly standing up for a strongly held conviction, was forced instead to publicly grovel before tween artist Swift. And 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 moments at the VMAs as very public collisions between adult and tween performers. In fact the audiences for these acts overlap significantly, as the audience for pop music is overwhelmingly young and tween media increasingly targets older children, so both incidents at the VMAs were potentially intelligible without reference to age. 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 (and Sparks did later appear on the Fox News Channel’s *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 all female performers with the sexual contradictions specifically 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 might be the first ‘marked’ aspect of their identities.) 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 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 apparently meant something more like ‘tween-age.’) Whereas Sparks claimed for herself the role of spokesperson on behalf of tween artists, Justin Bieber interpellated Taylor Swift as someone with whom he has solidarity, and thus, despite her almost twenty years of age, a member in good standing of the tweens he and Miranda Cosgrove unquestionably represented. 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, even to grovel.

Tweens’ ‘power,’ of course, derives substantially from adults who mobilize on behalf of put-upon kids—very different from previous logics of youth-cultural defiance. 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 after returning

from backstage 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—along with the more mundane compunctions not to ‘pick on’ kids. Sparks’s ‘defensive’ response—though in my view the most aggressive act described here—positioned Brand as the attacker, and an unprovoked attack on ‘children’ by an adult (especially 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 is that Sparks could and did defend herself and her peers. ‘Tween’ is generally coded as white and feminine, and the logic of vulnerability applied in even greater force to the encounter between West and Swift, where the asymmetry of a powerful adult man ‘attacking’ a meek young woman was all the 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’ (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’. (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)—fancifully applying the language of alternative music scenes, or even of radical political movements, to 7- to 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. 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. Banet-Weiser, for instance, argues that animated Nickelodeon 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). Banet-Weiser and others have pointed out how Nickelodeon’s programming also drew on feminist and multicultural discourses to produce children as a particularly empowered and oppositional audience (Banet-Weiser 2004; Hains 2007; Schor 2004:52–53).

Tween media positions kids as legitimate consumers in the marketplace, but also, through anticipatory tropes of maturity and contradictory tropes of 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)

This sort of double-consciousness plays out in the alternately childish and mature presentations of children’s media, producing the reinforcing dialectic of marginality and participation, authenticity and assimilation, that is common to identity politics movements. Children’s media play both sides of the dialectic, at least so far, presenting a vision of childhood ‘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’ (Ito 2007:105). By inscribing children’s amateur voices and phantasmagorical imagery into its products, Kidz Bop uses authentically childish repertoires to justify otherwise positioning kids as pretty normal audiences. Hannah Montana’s ‘best of both worlds’—strangely reminiscent of Second Wave feminism’s struggles with the contradictions of work and family—suggests kids can ‘have it all’: an authentically childish childhood as well as meaningful participation in public culture. 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. And 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 lives 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 ideas of musical blackness or the ‘eternal feminine.’ Authentic childishness, like blackness or femininity, is not a naturally occurring characteristic but rather an essentializing and marginalizing discourse (Radano 2003; de Beauvoir [1952] 1989); as Ito points out, the childish tropes of kids media are ‘engineered social productions’ rather than a ‘natural childhood pleasure principle’ (2005:100). The usefulness of this appeal to—and construction of—authenticity is that marginality can be seen alternately as a site for powerful critique and transformation, 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.

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, which ‘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’ (Warner 2002:119). 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, and in

opposition to representatives of another group, performing on TV for everyone to see the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion that Warner argues are inherent in the constitution of any public, or any counterpublic, for that matter (2002:113).

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 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 children’s media 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.¹⁴

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, as a public exists

¹⁴ In many way the presentations of children as nightclub-going audiences in the Kidz Bop video resonates remarkably with Warner’s account of publics and counterpublics. Whereas the agency of classic, Habermasian publics always involves tropes of reading and opining, Warner asks us to imagine that a counterpublic of women ‘She-Romps’ might romp (Warner 2002:124); Kidz Bop’s ‘Since U Been Gone’ video seems to depict a public of children *playing*.

‘by virtue of being addressed’ (Warner 2002:67). The language of letting kids be kids also appears in the playground and classroom (Bickford 2011), as do expressions of group solidarity linking childishness and consumption (Bickford In press-b, In press-c). A childhood counterpublic 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 counterpublic is a public to which a child may belong even though her parents do not.

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