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Tyler Bickford, Columbia University
tb2139@columbia.edu

Abstract

Working from ethnographic research with K–8 schoolchildren at a small public school in Vermont, this chapter examines one of the central practices of music listening of contemporary U.S. children: splitting the cheap earbuds that lately accessorize many consumer devices in order to share them and listen jointly with friends. At Heartsboro Central School, students used their portable music players to move through space, tuck into clothes, and link friends from ear to ear. 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. 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. By sharing earbuds kids activated and delineated relationships, and they solidified certain types of social bonds. With the same actions they enforced and regulated status hierarchies, excluding certain children from listening even while expanding access for others who might be limited by parental resources or restrictions. While a complex logic of genre, celebrity, and consumerism informed HCS children's musical tastes and habits, most prominent was the intimate embedding of earbuds as social anchors among the complex networks and hierarchies of these elementary- and middle-school children. This chapter argues that through their listening practices children's upset the rationalizing logics of privatization and isolation that accrue to headphones and portable music, as they 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.

Introduction

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 (Schor 2004). 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 material culture of toys, trading cards, and dolls. Children are now active—even iconic—users of all sorts of mobile media devices, and earbuds and MP3 players have become especially prominent in children’s peer culture. But despite their importance to markets and their image in the popular imagination as eager consumers of commercial music and electronics, pre-teenage children are largely ignored or marginalized by musicologists and media scholars. Children’s media practices, embedded in the intimate interactivity of their dense and energetic peer cultures, are often markedly different from adult uses of the same technologies. Working from ethnographic research with K–8 schoolchildren at a small public school in Vermont, this chapter examines one of the central practices of music listening of contemporary U.S. children: splitting the cheap earbuds that lately accessorize many consumer devices in order to share them and listen jointly with friends.

During the 2007–8 school year, I conducted field research about music and media consumption at the community school in a town I call Heartsboro.¹ With a population of about

¹ Names of individuals and the locality are changed throughout. Research with children can be bureaucratically, practically, and ethically fraught (Christensen and James 2000), but basic principles—of consent, reciprocity, and minimization of risk—apply. I have been a long-term

eight hundred, Heartsboro is located in the Green Mountains of southern Vermont, half an hour drive from the nearest grocery store. The village's mills, factories, and ski slopes all closed in the previous generation, but a working-class ethos remained as families adapted to a complex and changing regional economy that more and more emphasized cultural tourism, arts and education, and the service industry. In 2007–8 Heartsboro Central School was attended by fewer than eighty students in pre-kindergarten to eighth grade, 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. 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.

My initial encounter with HCS kids' music listening came at recess on the first day of school in 2007. I saw eighth-graders Amber and Daisy sitting side-by-side on the swings, talking in a group of friends while listening to Amber's iPod, the earbud cables stretched across the

resident of the region surrounding Heartsboro, where I have continuing family ties. In 2002 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. 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, an institutional role that helped legitimate and solidify—for kids and adults—my continuous presence at HCS, but I made very clear 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 occasional expense of maintaining an orderly or effective classroom.

eighteen inches between the swings. 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. They took my question as a challenge, and Daisy turned to Amber with a mischievous look as they began to pump their legs, almost hitting their friends who scrambled out of the way. They laughed and cheered each other on as they swung higher and higher, 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 dropped out of Daisy's ear when they finally fell out of sync while slowing down from the peak of their swing. When they came to a stop Daisy looked at me, pleased and defiant, demanding acknowledgment of their physical accomplishment: "See?"

HCS students actively engaged the capacities of their music players to move through space, tuck into clothes, and link friends from ear to ear. 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. Like Amber and Daisy on the swings, 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. Suspended from ear to ear, headphone cables 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. 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 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.

These portable music practices were incorporated into an 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. 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 Custadero 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.² 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.

“iPod culture,” “audile technique,” and “digital natives”: Finding a place for kids’ listening in scholarly narratives of sonic fragmentation and Internet sociality

In the only book-length examination of the cultural practices of MP3 players, Michael Bull identifies the intensely individual, immersive, and private mobile music practices of “iPod culture” among adults as “hyper post-Fordism” (2008:29), an extreme manifestation of postmodern fragmentation and mobility. This frame locates the iPod—and by extension MP3 players in general—as an incremental expansion of the “inversion” of privatized listening that appeared along with the Sony Walkman in the late 1970s, which, as Paul du Gay and his coauthors argue, brought private listening out of domestic spaces and into public (1997:114). The Walkman, du Gay et al. point out, was first marketed in 1979 with two headphone jacks, because its developers thought “it would be considered rude or discourteous for one person to listen to music alone” (1997:58). 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—building the logic of individual audition into the devices themselves. Tracing back from the iPod to the Walkman, such a historicization continues progressively out of emerging late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century practices of idealizing

² 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* (2008). 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.

hearing and privatizing space that Jonathan Sterne has labeled “audile technique”—in which “headset culture” played a prominent role—which led to “the subsequent commodification and collectivization of individuated listening” (2003:155). This narrative of increasingly fragmented and privatized listening filters into the popular imagination: in a recent discussion of the appropriateness of electronics as gifts for young children, for instance, psychologist Kathy Hirsh-Pasek reflects Bull’s anxious account of musical isolation when she tells the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “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).

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 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 ear, 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 "friend" relationship, linking them in intersubjective, but exclusive, experience (Porcello 1998; Schutz [1951] 1977).

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, but at HCS I never witnessed any discourses of cleanliness or attention to hygiene by kids engaged in sharing or by concerned adults.³ Very occasionally sharing earbuds

³ Though issues of hygiene never came up during my fieldwork, they 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 will note 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

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 and immediate method for sharing music than the wireless file-transfer function of the Zune, Microsoft's competitor device (Levy 2006). Jobs's scenario, of a male teenager trying to impress a girl, emphasizes the familiarity and physical closeness of courtship, a youthful and intimate social field—like friendship—to which anxieties about hygiene or degraded listening would be external.

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.” 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. Forthcoming)—do not follow up their introductory remarks with any direct analysis of young

deploy such tropes as part of a generalized stance of disapproval and concern toward kids' peer practices.

people's actual uses of portable music devices, preferring instead to examine how young people use the connective affordances of the Internet and wireless communications devices.

Discussions of MP3 players as new media tend to 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. Participating in emerging "networked publics" (Ito 2008), users of MP3 players can share playlists online, download cheap or pirated music easily, and transport large amounts of music with them on their 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 Wal-Mart. 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 Wal-Mart brand), and Craig (sold in convenience stores and pharmacies), among others.⁴ Ironically some of these cheaper devices were more likely to have extras like the built-in microphones that the kids found useful. While their music devices could hold many songs (even relatively inexpensive devices had 512MB of storage, which would store about a hundred songs), with only a few exceptions kids' devices had songs numbering in the dozens rather than the hundreds. With so few songs,

⁴ Kids rarely referred to their non-iPod devices by brand. Instead the labels that circulated were "iPod" and "MP3" (without the modifying "player"). They distinguished categorically between "iPods" and "MP3s," explicitly and vehemently rejecting my suggestion 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?" This categorical confusion was present among adults, too, some of whom understood iPod and MP3 as competing brands from Apple and Microsoft.

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 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.⁵

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

⁵ 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.

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.

Although MP3 players were largely disconnected from the Internet at HCS, in their use for shared listening we might recognize elements of the technologically mediated connectivity among real-world intimates that is so often seen to characterize other digital communications practices. Ito's description of the mobile Internet in Japan as "a snug and intimate technosocial tethering, a personal device supporting communications that are a constant, lightweight, and mundane presence in everyday life" (2005:1) 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. That said, 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. Forthcoming; boyd 2008b; Hijazi-Omari and Ribak 2008; Lenhart et al. 2007; Palfrey et al. 2008), so it is a small move to see portable technologies used to connect friends *in* face-to-face settings.

In these face-to-face settings, earbuds are deeply embedded in structures of friendship, a social configuration linked to childhood and canonically located at school. A growing literature argues that childhood, like other markers of identity with which it overlaps, is a socially constructed category that structures the everyday practices of children and adults (Prout and

James 1990), whose ideological content informs broader discourses about schooling, the structure of the family, social change, and the future (Cole and Durham 2008). While schools are often seen primarily to socialize children into eventual positions within a hegemonic adulthood, it is valuable to understand schooling also as a site for producing children *as* children (Austin, Dwyer, and Freebody 2003)—as marginal “others” separated from and subordinated to an imputed adult order. Understood in this way, familiar social characteristics of childhood like friendship and peer culture can be seen not simply as “natural” sites for development, but as historical outcomes of the persistent spatial and social separation of children from adults in the institutions where children spend their days. This separation is reinforced by the rapidly expanding children’s consumer industries, which explicitly appeal to notions of childhood independence and oppositionality (Cook 2007) with slogans like “let kids be kids” and “kids rule!” (McDonough 2004; Banet-Weiser 2007). Thus, in the interplay of schooling, peer culture, and consumer media, practices like earbud-sharing consolidate kids’ relationships with one another and build peer environments at the margins of adult presence and awareness.

Body techniques

Locating MP3 players in the interactions of physically proximate friends allows us to see how the intimate tetherings of 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 eighth-graders and best friends Amber and Alice about sharing earbuds, Amber’s response pointed to the close coordination of listeners’ bodies that was needed to listen with a friend. First, she 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.

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!”⁶ 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 friendship groups, these practices were learned and perfected, though whether they were passed

⁶ At HCS I am variously known as Tyler, Mr. Bickford, Bicky, Icky Vicky, and Kyle.

down or repeatedly innovated is difficult to determine. On the one hand, we might see Dahlia's and Katie's shuffle as "interpretive reproduction"—William Corsaro's (1992) term for children acting out scripts with each other that 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.

Social connection

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.⁷ Only the older boys in seventh and eighth grade seemed at all reluctant to share earbuds. The emotional and affective charge of such physical intimacy 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). 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.⁸

⁷ 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, and girls' relatively heightened interest in music listening may contribute to the gendered differentiation of video-game practices.

⁸ 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 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

In some instances, joint listening involved providing access to MP3 players to those who otherwise lacked them, as in the above examples, in which Amber and Dahlia both shared their music with friends (Daisy and Katie) 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. 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 nearly every kid in third grade and up returned to school with one. 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 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 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

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.

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.

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. This practice was so common that kids would complain about earbuds that were not loud enough to be used this way.

Within classroom settings other than the more permissive Art class, listening together was precluded by adult rules and seating arrangements that often separated close friends, but kids' individual listening was always articulated as a joint and sociable activity. In most classes music listening was strictly forbidden, and thought students would often argue with teachers to be allowed to listen while doing their work, they were almost always denied. But they worked together to find ways to bring their small and easily concealed devices into class, despite teachers' restrictions. Within their friendship groups they shared techniques and best practices. 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. Despite their caution in concealing their listening from teachers, they would publicize their surreptitious listening by pointing it out to friends and quietly laughing when they could see that the teacher was not looking. 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 all of these practices, whether passing earbuds around or sharing with a friend, listening in a group to earbuds as speakers, or scheming about the best

ways to listen alone in class, kids consolidated friendships and social groups and, to an extent, flattened access to media and technology.

Stratification and exclusion

As MP3 players and earbuds were charged with the intimacy and intensity of childhood 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 youthful gossip and heterosexual disaggregation as a constitutive activity of differentiation in the broader social life of school. Amber's 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.

The 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. Such moments of dispute were rare, because the conventions were tacit. Johnny understood how consumer media practices 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, this "breach" exposing his lack of access to a stratified regime of shared listening.

Listening and the institutional practices of school

Though sharing earbuds was ubiquitous in the peculiarly intimate public spaces of school, such practices appeared to be much less common in non-school spaces, where the friendships in which it flourished were less dominant social formations. Though kids would listen together on the bus or when visiting one another's homes, earbuds were not often shared between siblings or with parents, and 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. That such out-of-school listening points toward the sort of rationalization and compartmentalization described by Sterne suggests that the institutional and social contexts of school itself, which implicitly and explicitly structure the ways children and adults relate and interact with one another, are particularly salient to the constitution of kids' peer cultural listening modalities.

Teachers and administrators 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.” Other teachers disagreed, seeing value in items like music players or chewing gum for helping students concentrate and arguing against too many regulations of free time. Students who liked to listen during class would privately object to me that they still did their schoolwork while listening; as one eighth-grader said, “since you can’t tell the difference if we have [an earbud] in or not, I don’t see why it matters.” 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 socializing kids toward adult habits of individualization and private listening; rather, by framing banned items as hidden, close, and intimate, they further articulate them to the marginal and subordinated peer sociability and intimacy to which kids are so committed. Of

course, adult regulations 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 it is 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.

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.⁹ 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. In a digital era where infinite reproducibility is seen as a central feature linking postmodern technological and cultural configurations—media files can be transferred and copied without any loss of information—HCS students often ignored or rejected these capacities and used the built-in (and very low quality) microphones in their MP3 players to record and share music. Rather than

⁹ Students were aware of stereo: seventh-grader Randy, for instance, whose complimentary airline earbuds were not marked with “L” and “R,” would listen to the beginning of Trace Adkins's “Honky Tonk Badonkadonk,” which pans the singer's “Left / Left / Left right left” from ear to ear, to ensure that he was putting each earbuds into the “correct” ear.

searching for a song on the Internet (on family computers they were not always allowed to access because of their age), downloading it (possibly paying for it with a parent's credit card), and transferring it to their MP3 player, they would put the microphone up to their television or to computer speakers to record music from a music video. Or they would place an earbud from a friend's device up to the microphone of their own, transferring music from one MP3 player to another. These recordings would then join the other music on their MP3 players to be used in everyday listening, undistinguished from the other tracks on their devices.

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 inappropriate 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 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. Earbuds instrumentalized listening as a sociable practice in the nooks and crannies of everyday life at school.

If we do not see at HCS the same ideological articulation of MP3 players to privacy and isolation that Bull finds among London adults—if, in fact, we find quite the opposite—an important reason is that school and childhood represent unstable sites for such public/private binaries to establish themselves. “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). Moreover friendship, the canonically “childish” relationship at the center of earbud-sharing practices, puts individuals in a slippery relationship to the private subjectivities of late modernity (Hey 2002), upsetting the normative boundaries of property and propriety that limit the scope of “sharing” and regulate the proximity of social bodies. If the social spaces of the playground, lunchroom, or classroom cannot be properly called “public,” what would it mean for the “private” listening of a Walkman or iPod to invade them? Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) sees Western regimes of rationality—precisely those discursive regimes implicated in Sterne’s and Bull’s historicization of private listening practices—as contested by childhood cultures of phantasmagoria and absurdity. Childish cultural practices have their own genealogies that are not simply determined by their intersections with modern capitalism or bureaucratic institutions, though children’s practices may, like any marginalized group’s, be oriented in opposition to dominant institutions. That their practices of listening and consumption can be remarkably different from those of urban adults might even be expected, along with the fact that those practices are specifically noisy, overlapping, and “irrational” in a school environment that constantly monitors, regulates, and rationalizes noise. So 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 large- and small-scale regimes of power—among their peers, with teachers, in families, and with national and global institutions of education and entertainment. But it is necessary to recognize a diversity of practices in the contemporary media landscape, to note that the rapid rise and adoption of mobile media technologies can represent profoundly different social innovations and historical

trajectories in different segments of society, and to acknowledge children as such a segment.

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