TWEEN POP

TYLER BICKFORD

CHILDREN'S MUSIC AND PUBLIC CULTURE


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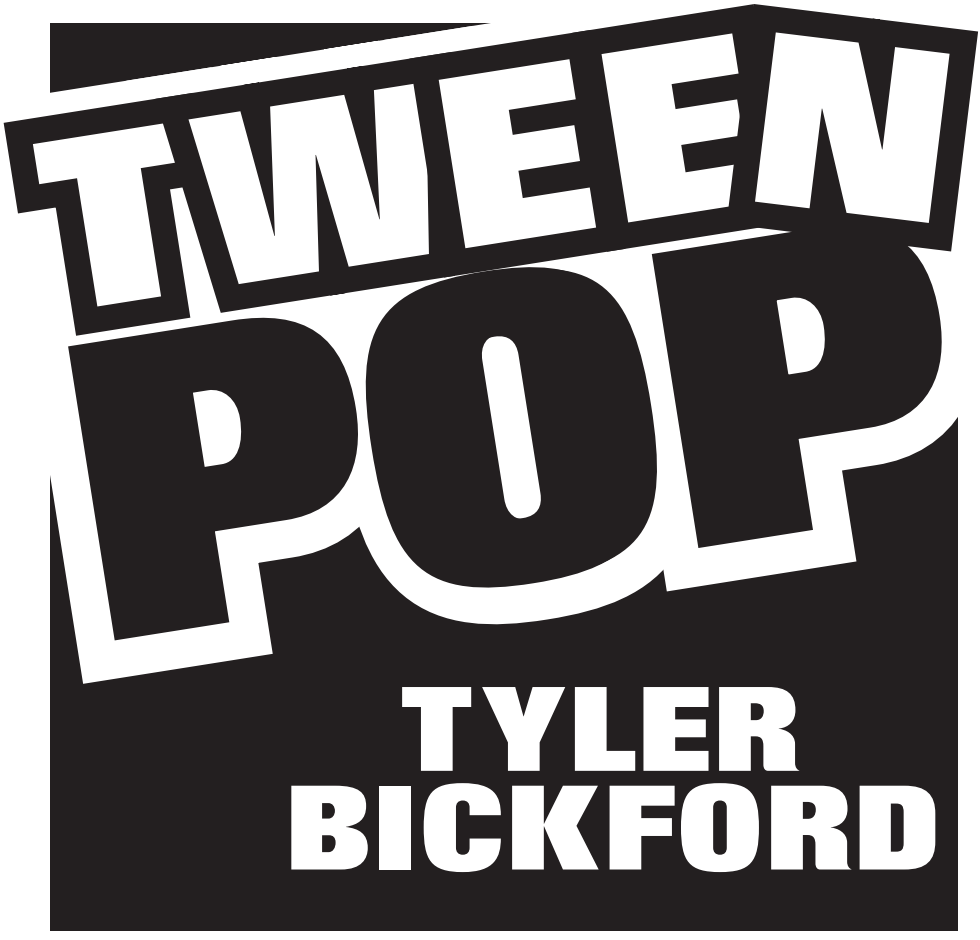

CHILDREN'S MUSIC AND PUBLIC CULTURE

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THE TWEEN MOMENT

INTRODUCTION

In September 2007 I started a yearlong research project about children and music at a small elementary and middle school in rural Vermont. That August, *High School Musical 2*—the massively popular and highly anticipated follow-up to the equally popular Disney Channel movie *High School Musical*—had just premiered on the Disney Channel to much media fanfare and excitement among the students. The timing of the end-of-summer release was almost cruel, as the film focused on the end of the school year and the beginning of summer vacation, just as kids were starting back up at school in the fall. Its first musical number has students rhythmically chanting "summer!" as the clock ticks down to the final bell of the last day of school, when they burst into song:

> What time is it?
> Summertime!
> It's our vacation.[1]

That the release coincided with the start of the school year meant that a lot of kids had *High School Musical* on their minds as they came back to school to spend every day side by side with their friends. A favorite playground game for first- and second-grade girls that September was to play "High School Musical"—which involved a lot of arguing about who got to play the main female character "Gabriella" (including devising a new twin sister role so they could share the character a bit) and a lot of singing of snippets of songs from the movie, but not much actual pretend play or role play as the characters. Some of the first and most intense activity around pop music in my research, then, was around songs written and performed for children.[2]

I started that project hoping to study the everyday experiences of popular music audiences. I had worked with kids in schools before, and I knew that pop music is an important part of the social life and values of schoolchildren. School seemed to be a natural place to uncover talk and action oriented around pop music and media. I expected to find a lot of energy devoted to fine-grained distinctions between popular music genres and formats: rock, hip-hop, country, Top 40. I did not anticipate that music for children would be one of the kids' basic categories of music, comparable to Top 40 or country, because I thought of "children's music" as something for preschool-aged children, in the tradition of Raffi and Barney. In fact "tween" pop—professionally produced recordings targeted to audiences straddling childhood and adolescence—was a central part of the cultural life of the elementary- and middle-school kids that I worked with in 2007 and 2008.

This book is my retrospective attempt to make sense of a cultural phenomenon that, like many parents, teachers, journalists, and even kids, I struggled to fully grapple with at the time. From 2001 to 2011, music for children was one of the rare financial bright spots in a music industry that was otherwise spiraling downward as its business models were made obsolete by changes in information technology. In a decade that I now think of as a "tween moment" in American public culture, a broad swath of the child audience was redefined as be*tween* childhood and adolescence in a precarious terminological balance that teetered between the pleasurable intimacies of children and the defiantly autonomous consumption of teenagers. In this tween moment, children were not just confirmed as the important audience for popular music and other media that they had long been, they were ascendant as a premier audience demographic, to be catered to with mainstream attention and deference.

Children's musical play and performance is a long-standing and well-documented part of children's cultural traditions and social relationships. But the genre of "children's music"—music produced by adults for children's consumption—has not historically been the ground for peer culture and social bonding among children. In North America music composed and performed for children has mostly focused on very young, preschool-aged children, with artists like Raffi, Pete Seeger, and Sharon, Lois, and Bram singing songs with simple arrangements, folk-song and nursery-rhyme structures, and topics conventionally associated with childhood (a lot of animal songs). Such music largely addresses its audience as children in the company of parents, rather than as kids in the company of friends. One widespread narrative among parents, journalists, and media professionals

says that kids' tastes have been maturing at ever-younger ages, so eight-year-old elementary-school children who might once have been the audience for traditional children's music now demand the pop music targeted to teenagers. As music to listen to and discuss and then play pretend with friends on the playground, pop music's aspirational associations with adolescence position kids as sophisticated and relatively autonomous listeners and consumers, who relate to one another equally and reciprocally, rather than as dependent and subordinate junior members in their families.

Pop music, though long dismissed as infantile or undeveloped, was not for kids until recently. With its emphasis on romance and sexuality, nightlife, and youth-cultural rebellion, pop does not fit nicely with the vision of innocence, paternal authority, and domestic harmony that continues to structure American ideologies of childhood and the family. Certainly there are abundant examples of pop music marketed to kids prior to 2000s tween pop: children were enthusiastic audiences for the 1960s British invasion, 1970s bubblegum, 1980s glam, and 1990s boy bands. As early as the 1960s children were targeted as audiences through music-based television shows like *The Archies*, *The Sugar Bears*, *The Beatles*, *Josie and the Pussycats*, and later *Jem and the Holograms*, and marketers went so far as to stamp playable records into the cardboard on the back of breakfast cereal boxes (Cafarelli 2001; Sutton 2001). But music-focused toys and cartoon shows separate pop for kids from the rest of the music industry, subordinating it to merchandisable consumer products rather than standing on its own as music. Music-first pop acts like the Osmonds, the Jackson Five, Tiffany, New Kids on the Block, Britney Spears, and many others were certainly happy to include children in their audiences, even making significant efforts to court child listeners (Leeds 2001). Especially during the late 1990s, teen pop acts, including Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, and boy bands NSYNC and the Backstreet Boys, targeted child audiences and were promoted heavily on children's media. The Disney Channel and Radio Disney, Nickelodeon, and Fox Kids aired concerts, appearances, and music videos daily. Still "teen pop" (like earlier "teen idols") was just that, primarily targeted to and conceptualized around the postwar idea of "teenagers" that remained the dominant lens for understanding young audiences of pop music, despite the actual children included in the audiences for those acts. If anything the construction of teen pop in terms of age categories would ultimately serve to highlight the mismatch between teen pop and child audiences, and eventually cause a breakup between those acts and the children's media networks (Kelland 2001). Over the later decades of the twentieth

century, mainstream pop continually assimilated music from subcultures and countercultures with its incorporation of R&B, hip-hop, disco, country, and Latin music, each format valued by the music industry because of its well-defined demographic targets (Weisbard 2014). But it was not until the 2000s that music for child audiences was conceptualized as a pop music format like these others, rather than being mobilized simply as a marketing tool for consumer product sales.

In 2007 adults like me were caught by surprise by the huge popularity and visibility of music for children. In the early 2000s, immediately after the late 1990s peak of teen pop, the children's media industry had begun to openly and enthusiastically restructure itself around producing pop music for kids. In 2001 *Kidz Bop* was released, featuring Top 40 hits rerecorded karaoke-style to include choruses of exuberant children singing along with the hooks, and in 2002 the Disney Channel star Hilary Duff released the first of a series of successful pop albums targeted not to Top 40 radio's teen and young adult audience but to the child audiences already invested in her television show. With the rest of the music industry in freefall, kids' pop grew and grew. In 2005 *Kidz Bop 7* and *Kidz Bop 8* both reached the top ten on *Billboard*'s weekly sales charts and were quickly certified gold. In March 2006 three children's albums—*Kidz Bop 9*, the *High School Musical* soundtrack, and the soundtrack for the movie *Curious George*—held the top three spots on the weekly *Billboard* charts, and the *High School Musical* soundtrack would go on to become the top-selling album of the year (Jenison 2007). In 2007 the Disney Channel sitcom *Hannah Montana* spun off a wildly successful soundtrack and concert tour. It and the *High School Musical 2* soundtrack both held spots in the top ten annual sales charts (*Billboard* 2007). That same year sixteen-year-old country singer-songwriter Taylor Swift released her first album, and in 2009 fourteen-year-old Justin Bieber would rise to fame through YouTube and social media. Eventually a process that had begun as the narrow targeting of children as a previously underserved audience for pop music expanded enough to encroach upon and cross over into the "mainstream" of pop music.

A key term in this development was "tween," a demographic label that became widespread in the 1990s to consolidate an awkward but profitable marketing category of nine- to twelve-year-old kids (though marketers often expanded this range from as low as four to as high as fifteen years old) who might otherwise be called preadolescents (Coulter 2014). Tweens were seen as children, especially girls, who were aging out of children's consumer products but not yet ready to be marketed to as teenagers. Daniel

Cook and Susan Kaiser (2004) argue that the most characteristic trait of the tween consumer industry is ambiguity, in its adoption of multiple and apparently contradictory markers of age and status (both child and teen), so that tween products are simultaneously anticipatory and constraining. While the tween category began as a further segmentation of the children's market into ever more finely graded age categories, it expanded to become a hegemonic frame of the children's culture industries. This expansion makes sense if the tween problematic involves being fully involved in two worlds rather than excluded from either: expanding outward to encompass both childhood and adolescence provides a sort of "both/and" abundance rather than an "either/or" choice, which nonetheless awkwardly asserts that apparent contradictions are not contradictory. This played out visibly in the music industry, as pop music forms associated with teenagers and youth culture were packaged in bright colors and set to childhood themes, in order to address an audience that straddled childhood and adolescence, and whose members ranged from children starting elementary school to young teenagers starting high school.

In the 2000s children's media, with music at its commercial and cultural forefront, grappled loudly and explicitly with the problem of children's relationship to mainstream public culture. The argument of this book is that the culture industries in this period struggled, and eventually succeeded, at converting childhood into a cultural identity "like" race and gender as they are addressed by the consumer industries—which is to say flattened into equivalence and interchangeability as one demographic category among many. This involved the culmination of a generations-long process of reconceptualizing childhood to make it legible as such a demographic category while preserving, and even intensifying, traits identified as authentically childish or essential to the definition of childhood. But like other categories of identity, and in some ways perhaps more intensively for childhood, those authentic or essential traits that mark it off as an intelligible and bounded identity also are in profound tension with the idea of participation in public culture. That is, among the traits that define childhood as an authentic or essential identity that allows individuals to claim membership in a dispersed and distributed group, the definitive ones are dependence, domesticity, and privacy—qualities explicitly opposed to public participation. This form of "identity"—the identity of, for example, "identity politics"—is necessarily public: identities in this sense are "imagined communities," an experience of relationships among strangers produced through the circulation of texts and media (B. Anderson 1983; M. Warner

2002). Therefore the problem that children's media worked through during the 2000s was that to claim childhood as a public consumer identification would require either sacrificing those qualities that make childhood culturally recognizable or finding a way to deny this contradiction even as they promoted it.

The tween music industry addressed this challenge through a novel combination of music and childhood. Moving away from the paternalistic, emotionally evacuated, and didactic kitsch traditionally invoked by "children's music," it invested instead in the heightened emotion and peculiar intimacies to which music and childhood, in different but interestingly parallel ways, both provide access. Music is a medium and childhood is a social status, but both reflect profoundly ideological and intensely felt investments in cultural value, emotional authenticity, and, especially, relational intimacies. While on the one hand pop music's emphasis on romance, nightlife, and affective interiority pushes against ideologies of childhood innocence, those same traits position popular music in terms of intensely felt emotional intimacy and the public display of private feeling, qualities in which childhood, too, is deeply invested. By turning to pop music as the leading edge of this millennial effort to assimilate childhood fully into public consumer culture, the children's media industries did not so much resolve a tension between pop music and childhood as they uncovered their underlying complementarity as cultural symbols. Yoking popular music to consumer childhood amplified their shared investments in intimacy and sentiment and provided a logic for conceiving of childhood as simultaneously an intimate and a public status.

CHILDREN AND COMMERCE IN THE LONG TWENTIETH CENTURY

Tween music developed out of a long history of cultural anxiety about the status of children in public. The history of children in the United States over the course of the twentieth century is a dual narrative of, on the one hand, increasing exclusion from traditional public spaces and confinement within adult-governed shelters and, on the other hand, increasing recognition by media and consumer industries. Their bodies forced further and further out of actual public spaces, children are then asked to sublimate themselves and emerge in an attenuated form as participants in public consumer culture.

In the late nineteenth century, during a period of industrialization and urbanization, children emerged as an important class of wage laborers. As

Viviana Zelizer documents, children's status as economically productive workers peaked in 1910 when nearly two million children aged ten to fifteen, at least one child out of every six, were employed outside of their homes—a number that does not count younger children or children doing productive unwaged labor within their homes (1985: 56). While the numbers of child workers increased dramatically from 1860 to 1910, changes wrought by urbanization and industrialization only formalized and monetized children's long-standing productive contributions to household economics that were informal but no less widespread in pre-industrial agricultural and rural communities. As quickly as the employment of children increased, it later dropped dramatically, and by 1930 with the expansion of compulsory schooling and growing support for child labor restrictions fewer than 700,000 children ten to fifteen were employed, a number that continued to decline. Zelizer's history traces the sentimentalization of childhood in American culture through the intense cultural politics that played out in debates over child labor. Middle-class progressive reformers advocated against poor and immigrant domestic formations by marshaling a moralistic and sentimentalized vision of childhood innocence and selfless parental love threatened by the intrusion of economic self-interest into familial relations. Opponents of reformers deployed equally sentimental accounts of selfless children lovingly contributing to their family's material needs while developing habits of hard work and responsibility. The former vision ultimately won out over the latter, and the idea of children working for wages outside the home has become nearly unthinkable for American adults.

If children were excluded from economic participation in the form of wage labor in the first half of the twentieth century, in the second half of the twentieth century they would be reintegrated into the economy as consumers. The postwar expansion of American consumer culture substantially involved children. The earliest attempts at producing consumer products specifically for children were targeted to mothers, but marketers slowly developed habits of what Cook (2004) calls "pediocularity," in which they tried to see through children's eyes to most successfully market products to them. In the 1950s and 1960s, while the children's media and consumer industries were emerging, "teenagers" were cultivated as a highly visible cultural identity and an independent market demographic, and youth culture, especially rock 'n' roll and pop music, became the focus of the media and consumer industries (Hine 1999; Wartella and Mazzarella 1990). Children were an important and controversial audience in the

early period of television's mass expansion (Spigel 1993), but it would not be until the 1970s and 1980s that the establishment of public broadcasting and cable television would create the separate channels for the development of programs like *Sesame Street* and cable networks like Nickelodeon that would provide the basis for a mass children's media industry.

During the same period the ascendant cultural politics of anti-1960s backlash and reactionary white conservatism led to the institutionalization of "family values" discourses. Along with the popularization of psychoanalytic "inner child" discourses and highly publicized debates about child sexual abuse (Beck 2015; Ivy 1995), the cultural politics of this period foregrounded childhood and the family as the site of moral panic and political urgency. As children were increasingly addressed by media and consumer industries created especially for them, they were also increasingly sheltered and worried about by adults who saw threats to children everywhere (Fass 2012). By the end of the twentieth century children were confined to child-focused "islands" of playgrounds, schools, and homes (Gillis 2008). The growing children's consumer industries reinforced this islanding with an intensified emphasis on toys and media that would take place inside the home and that focused on playful and pleasurable activities. Henry Jenkins (1998) has argued that the exclusion of children from public spaces is directly tied to the expansion of children's media products like video games, which provide at least a metaphorical "freedom of movement" within the sheltered family home.[3]

The history of children's exclusion from labor went hand in hand with the exclusion of women from work and mid-century developments like the concept of the "family wage," designed to allow male heads of household to support wives doing unwaged domestic work including caring for children either attending school or innocently playing in the enclosure of their suburban home—a distinctly class- and race-based fantasy of the nuclear family as the foundational social institution. The postwar period saw perhaps the only mass effort in history to implement the vision of sheltered childhood laid out by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1762: "It is you that I address myself, tender and foresighted mother, who are capable of keeping the nascent shrub away from the highway and securing it from the impact of human opinions! Cultivate and water the young plant before it dies. Its fruits will one day be your delights. Form an enclosure around your child's soul at an early date. Someone else can draw its circumference, but you alone must build the fence" ([1762] 1979: 37–38). Women—confined to domesticity and then responsible for confining their children—were most strongly affected by the twin ideologies of domesticity and consumerism, as consumption

became an increasingly important part of the work of social reproduction (Friedan 1963; Willis [1970] 2014).[4] But as women returned to wage labor in large numbers in the later twentieth century—even as they maintained their responsibilities for unpaid domestic labor (Hochschild and Machung [1989] 2003)—children were the only figures left to stand for the ideology of unproductive, domestic, familial sentiment. As sociologist Allison Pugh puts it, "As mothers' work lives look more and more like fathers', who but the child is left to sacralize as the vessel of all that is dear about domesticity?" (2009: 20).

Just as wage labor was seen to intrude into loving family relationships, media and consumer culture also have long been seen as threatening to the autonomy of the family. If early television brought families together to watch, it also brought information and authority figures from outside the home that could potentially undermine parents (Spigel 1992). Since the 1970s groups like Action for Children's Television (K. Montgomery 2007a) and the Campaign for Commercial Free Childhood have advocated against commercial children's media on the grounds that children are especially susceptible to manipulation and misinformation by advertisements that seek to bypass parental oversight. Pugh's (2009) research in the 2000s suggests that consumer culture binds children most strongly to their peer communities outside the home, as key sources both of social "dignity" in school and friendship contexts and of parental concern and anxiety. Childhood consumerism began as a mid-century rearticulation of childhood to the family and domesticity, and (predictably) wound up as a connection of children to other children and communities beyond the home.

So the long trajectory of children's relationship to the economy from the late 1800s to the early 2000s begins with mass participation in wage labor outside the home, passes through the mid-century nuclear family, and ends with mass participation in consumer culture both inside and outside the home. The tension here, which is a key tension in this book, is that the intensive ideological and historical process of enclosing children fully and pervasively within the home and under the control of their parents made possible the development of a media culture for children that envisions them as participants in a public arena that transcends their local particularity.

THE INFANTILIZATION OF PUBLIC CULTURE

Against this background of children's changing relationship to their families, communities, and the economy, two related discourses emerged to explain and periodize the cultural status of children and childhood at the turn

of the century. In the first, anxious narratives of the decline of adulthood and celebrations of grown-ups' "rejuvenilization" (Noxon 2006) urgently diagnosed the infantilization of American culture in recent history. In the second, the rapid expansion of the children's media and entertainment industries over the same period was characterized by anxiety that childhood was disappearing as "kids are getting older younger." That children might be getting more mature even while adults are increasingly infantile suggests at least a surface contradiction between these two discourses. Neither narrative is satisfactory, and both are profoundly ideological, but together they point to a cultural politics of age as an important problem in contemporary culture. While this book is about children's media and child audiences, the thesis that adulthood—especially as it is enacted in entertainment and consumer culture—has been infantilized has significant bearing on my questions about the relationship of children to public culture. If public culture is said to have gone childish, what does that mean for children? I start here with an account of recent discourses about adult infantilization. In the next section I consider the emergence of the age category "tween" and its accompanying discourse about kids getting older younger, a phenomenon termed by marketers as "age compression."

Calling adults childish has a long and dubious history. As scholars including Courtney Weikle-Mills (2013) and Corinne Field (2014) have argued, age and maturity—specifically the capacity of women and people of color to achieve the normatively white and masculine standards of adulthood—were central to early American struggles over racial and gender equality.[5] One longstanding thread in the history of the politics of (im)maturity has emphasized entertainment and consumer culture as especially symptomatic of childishness. For example, Theodor Adorno's foundational critique of commoditized music defined the musical fetish as a "regression." Adorno argued, in a formulation that neatly distills the ideological links among discourses of primitivism, development, and disability, that popular music listeners "are not childlike, as might be expected on the basis of an interpretation of the new type of listener in terms of the introduction to musical life of groups previously unacquainted with music. But they are childish; their primitivism is not that of the undeveloped, but that of the forcibly retarded" ([1938] 1991: 46–47). Importantly, Adorno was not interested in childhood or adulthood as such. Instead those concepts provided him with a usefully loaded shorthand for expressing the value he placed on sophistication, reflection, and rationality. Adorno's target was capitalist culture, and calling adult listeners "childish" provided just one epithet among many to bolster his argument.

Infantilization critiques are not new, but starting with the publication of Neil Postman's *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982) they began to consolidate as a recognizable genre of criticism concerned especially with age. Taken as a group, these publications outline a trend that highlights age as an especially salient contemporary category of analysis. Moreover they take the "contemporary" as their central topic; that is, the infantilization discourses I consider here are explicitly historical in their efforts to periodize the present through their diagnosis of changing cultures of age. For example, Postman argued that the rise of television disintegrated the boundary between childhood and adulthood that had previously developed through the history of print and literacy.[6] Print spread knowledge through the esoteric skill of reading that even if universalized required years of initiation and training. For Postman, print created the distinction between adulthood and childhood in its distinction between learners and initiates, and that distinction stands for him as the central pillar of modern, enlightenment civilization. Television's orality, accessible to all speakers of a language, eliminated that distinction and therefore threatened civilization as such. Despite his title, Postman was clear that he was much less concerned about the loss of an idyllic Rousseauian childhood, since by his account, before print *everyone* was in a condition of childhood. Instead Postman worried about the re-infantilization of adults by television. Postman followed this argument to its disagreeable conclusion, ending with a note of sympathy for the "family values" of Jerry Falwell's newly ascendant Moral Majority, which had recently emerged as a political force that mobilized religious conservatives and claimed credit for the Reagan Revolution.

In many ways this is a familiarly declensionist argument, but in foregrounding childhood and adulthood Postman inaugurated a genre of criticism that would speed up dramatically toward the turn of the century. In 1997 cultural theorist Lauren Berlant published *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*. Berlant reads *The Simpsons* and other "silly objects" (1997: 12) from media and entertainment to put forward a "theory of infantile citizenship," which allows for "no vision of sustained individual or collective criticism and agency" (1997: 51). While Postman aligned himself with Falwell's Moral Majority, Berlant targeted the conservative movement and the Reagan presidency for redefining the public sphere as intimate and privatized, and therefore infantile, where the symbolic alignment of the citizen and fetus in anti-abortion rhetoric pointed to the evacuation of political agency and the construction of citizenship as passive and dependent. But while Berlant and Postman claimed different political allies and enemies,

their periodizations and diagnoses were broadly parallel: by the late twentieth century the traditionally adult spheres of politics and culture had been infantilized, and for both critics media, entertainment, and consumer culture were key culprits, or at least symptoms.[7]

In the same year the *New Yorker* published an essay by Kurt Anderson titled "Kids Are Us" (1997), which noted a trend of adult women wearing backpacks and worried that "moral sensibilities become juvenilized as well," with the apparently troubling result that a regressive public motivated by "undiscriminating hyper-empathy" was erroneous in celebrating two women, Maya Angelou and Marianne Williamson, as a "great poet" and "philosopher," respectively. Poet Robert Bly's *The Sibling Society* (1997) followed up *Iron John* (1990), his lament for the loss of true manliness, with a lament for the loss of responsible adulthood.[8] And psychologist Frank Pittman's self-help manual *Grow Up!* (1999) exhorted adults to do just that.

In the following decade—at the height of the tween moment—versions of this argument were published again and again in academic books, political jeremiads, and pop culture journalism. University of Toronto semiotician Marcel Danesi published the curmudgeonly *Forever Young: The Teen-aging of Modern Culture* (2003), which argued that psychological theories about adolescent development had spread a pernicious cultural myth that inappropriately prizes youth and in doing so valorizes popular culture (with music coming in for special criticism) while actively undermining the authority of families. Danesi called for "eliminating adolescence" to restore the dignity and authority of the patriarchal family, ironically inverting radical feminist calls to abolish childhood as part of efforts to dismantle the patriarchal family altogether (Firestone 1970). Also in 2003, conservative columnist Robert Samuelson wrote a short piece on the theme in *Newsweek*, and in 2004 the conservative *Weekly Standard* published a long essay by Joseph Epstein diagnosing Americans' "longing for a perpetual adolescence, cut loose, free of responsibility, without the real pressures that life, that messy business, always exerts." In 2006 journalist Christopher Noxon inverted the critical thrust of this argument in his celebratory *Rejuvenile*, which nonetheless ended with a chapter cautioning against too much childishness.

Noted political theorist Benjamin Barber's *Con$umed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* (2007) echoed Adorno with its thesis that infantilizing consumer culture "aims at inducing puerility in adults and preserving what is childish in children trying to grow up, even as children are 'empowered' to consume" (82). In its critique of consumer culture through the lens of age, Barber's jeremiad reiter-

ated Postman's lament of the decline of civilization and Berlant's concerns about the diminution of political agency: "The citizen . . . is an adult, a public chooser empowered by social freedom to effect the environment of choice and the agendas by which choices are determined and portrayed; the infantilized consumer is the private chooser, whose power to participate in communities or effect changes is diminished and whose public judgment is attenuated. The infantilist ethos, then, does the necessary work of consumer capitalism, but at the expense of the civilization that productivist capitalism helped create" (36). Ironically, while Barber and Postman published these works at the height of their careers as respected and influential scholars and critics, their emphasis on adult sobriety versus consumerist puerility was belied by the sensational tone and packaging of books written for a crossover, and excitable, popular audience. While Postman grudgingly credited the Moral Majority's cultural insights, Barber nostalgically celebrated the moralistic self-denial of early capitalism's "Protestant ethic" (36) and puritanically bemoaned "the new consumer penchant for age without dignity, dress without formality, sex without reproduction, work without discipline, play without spontaneity, acquisition without purpose, certainty without doubt, life without responsibility, and narcissism into old age and unto death without a hint of wisdom or humility. In the epoch in which we now live, civilization is not an ideal or an aspiration, it is a video game" (7).

The late 2000s saw several more such publications.[9] Film critic A. O. Scott wrote a widely read essay in the Sunday *New York Times Magazine* titled "The Post-Man" (2014), mostly about the prior decade of television. The web version was headlined "The Death of Adulthood in American Culture," and the essay recapitulated much of Postman's thesis that adulthood is in decline. But Scott's version of this story is unique for its qualified celebration (rather than lament) of a trend that might dismantle the patriarchal prerogatives of men. Postman, Barber, and the rest were for the most part blithely indifferent to the glaringly obvious gender politics implied by their nostalgia for adult prerogatives and their valorization of children's dependence and active cultivation (by unspecified caregivers). Postman's grandiose comfort with reactionary family values politics and Barber's offhand dismissal of "sex without reproduction" positioned them much closer to right-wing culture warriors than their self-identification as liberals might suggest. Scott, by contrast, foregrounded the status of women and explicitly raised the obvious question that "maturity" might just be a fig leaf for masculine privilege.

Infantilization discourses, especially in their mistrust of consumerism as the opposite of politics, are impossible to disentangle from a parallel

genre of "feminization" discourses (see, e.g., Douglas 1977; Gould 1999; Lenz 1985). With the complicated exception of Berlant (who has her own sympathies with but also misgivings about public femininity), infantilization laments almost always express masculinist anxiety about the expansion of the public sphere to include not just women but also working-class people and people of color. Framing this critique in terms of infantilization seems at times like a clever gambit to deflect criticism by rephrasing the same reactionary arguments with the depoliticized language of childhood rather than the highly politicized language of gender, race, or class—as with Postman's awkward attempt to separate out parenthood from patriarchy in his ponderous embrace of the Moral Majority. And the mass cultural objects of infantilization critics—popular television, popular novels, popular music—are historically aligned with women and other nondominant groups (Huyssen 1986). Feminist critics have long argued that because consumerism is coded feminine, critiques of consumerism tend to be implicitly or overtly sexist (Willis [1970] 2014). Insofar as women are also infantilized by a sexist and patriarchal culture, the rejection of consumer culture as childish and immature again lands on women. Thus the most straightforward explanation for the proliferation of infantilization discourses at the turn of the century is that they are just one more in a litany of wealthy white male complaints about identity politics veiled as high-minded concern about the erosion of civil society.[10]

Just as these familiar arguments against mass culture were being reworded using the terminology of childhood and adulthood, the children's media and consumer industries were growing dramatically, and child audiences were increasingly targeted by marketers. Thus, the increasingly widespread claim that consumer culture is childish grew almost perfectly in parallel with the consumer industry for children. Just at the moment that Postman was claiming in the early 1980s that television's erosion of the distinction between children and adults would mean that a separate "children's television" could never be feasible, separate children's television and other mass media began to grow unstoppably, exploding in the late 1990s and peaking in the 2000s. The growth of that industry required defining children as a separate and distinct group from adults and other audiences and consumer demographics. The boundaries and definition of childhood would be intensified and distilled, but with the logic of identity politics and consumer demographics, rather than that of apprenticeship and initiation that Postman admires about print culture. That project required a new concept and a new term: "tween."

Just as cultural commentators fretted that adults were being infantilized by consumer culture, the discourse of tweens emerged to consolidate a seemingly opposite anxiety: that children were maturing too quickly. This phenomenon was termed "age compression" by marketers and described by the slogan "kids getting older younger," which was ubiquitous enough to circulate among marketing professionals by its acronym, "KGOY" (Brown and Washton 2003: 19; Schor 2004: 55–58). The children's consumer market had long been known for fine-grained subdivisions of age ranges that were seen to be "compressing" into one another as kids graduated earlier to the next range. As Betsy Frank of MTV Networks, which at the time had two cable channels, youth-oriented MTV and child-oriented Nickelodeon, told sociologist Juliet Schor: "If something works for MTV, it will also work for Nickelodeon" (2004: 20). And by extension, the logic of age compression suggests that if something worked on Nickelodeon, it would work on the preschool-oriented programming block (and later standalone channel) Nick Jr. By this view, the age gradations of children's content were continually inflating, such that younger children were presented with more and more mature material, whittling away at the "childishness" of childhood.

What the age-compression narrative misses is that children and children's cultural institutions were not simply being folded or dissolved into mainstream or mature cultural institutions. MTV did not put Nickelodeon out of business—they remained complementary. Instead, part of the logic of age compression entailed a contrary motion, extending childhood rather than abridging it. For example, the expansion of pop music for kids in the 2000s might have supported a "getting-older-young" narrative, since the audience for this music included young children who might otherwise have listened to more traditional children's music in the folk-revival or musical-theater style. If pop music is conventionally associated with teenagers and young adults, then Disney selling kids' pop songs from live-action TV soundtracks instead of musical-theater numbers from animated-film soundtracks can be understood as moving up the age-and-content ladder. On the other hand, we can also see the opposite effect, with kids who might be expected to prefer mainstream pop sticking with Disney acts for a few more years. For example, in 2007 the same kids who were excited about *Hannah Montana* might have instead been excited about the mainstream pop-rock singer Kelly Clarkson, and kids who were excited about Disney's *Cheetah Girls* might instead have been excited about the mainstream girl group the

Pussycat Dolls. What's more, Disney's three prominent mid-decade musical products, *High School Musical*, *Hannah Montana*, and the Jonas Brothers, were somewhat age-graded, so *High School Musical* trended younger and the Jonas Brothers trended older, but all three still overlapped significantly with each other and with other companies' products, like Kidz Bop.[11] This had the real effect, which I witnessed clearly during my research at the time, that fourteen- and fifteen-year-old girls entering high school might still count the Jonas Brothers as their favorite musical act, claiming affinity for musicians who were strongly associated with Disney, definitively a children's media brand, and whose music was just as avidly consumed by much younger kids. If at one time children could be seen to move consistently through age-graded musical tastes—from liking classical music and kiddie music to liking pop music generally to articulating preferences for specific genres of popular music—brands like Disney were now marketing some of the same music to children starting elementary school and others leaving middle school. David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green note a similar range of products within the Pokémon brand: "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. . . . [T]hese 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" (2003: 382). Similarly, in her research about Norwegian children's relationship to Disney's tween products, Ingvild Sørenssen argues that children value "age shifting"—the ability to "be both small and big at the same time" or to be "different ages in different places"—and they see Disney as a "childlike space" that provides access to the pleasures of childhood more than early entry into adolescence (2014: 230–31). Since they merge strictly defined age ranges somewhat, these examples still make sense as age compression. But the directionality is less clear, since the possibility of "regression" is as important as "getting older younger." The category "tween" does a lot of this work, pulling simultaneously downward and upward. Therefore, material marketed to tweens persistently crept outward from a preadolescent center, expanding in both directions to include younger children as well as teenagers.

More than anything, the narrative of age compression as a sociological phenomenon in which empirical changes in the child audience forced the media and consumer industries to react seems to have been the un-

shakable folk wisdom of the children's marketing industry beginning in the 1990s. My review of the children's media trade press from the 1990s and 2000s finds executives in unanimous agreement that age compression was an urgent and driving force in changing their business. But when I have interviewed music and media executives active in the 1990s they do not provide evidence beyond personal experience—many simply cite their own children. It is not clear that actual children's tastes changed during the rapid process of getting-older-younger that was supposedly catalyzed in the 1990s. For example, a survey and literature review of studies of children's musical tastes in the mid- to late 1980s found a majority of four-year-olds expressing interest in pop music in addition to children's music, and nine- and ten-year-olds' tastes were heavily dominated by pop and rock (Feilitzen and Roe 1990). And, of course, the audience for early 1960s British invasion acts like the Beatles included excited children as well as fawning teenagers. By the early 2000s market researchers Robert Brown and Ruth Washton began to caution marketers that they "run the risk of committing a major error if they miscalculate the maturity and over-emphasize the sophistication of the average middle-schooler" (2003: 19)—this a year before Juliet Schor published her warning about the MTV-ization of Nickelodeon (2004).[12] Perhaps the audience changed, but certainly the industry changed. What we can see overall is the children's consumer industries working hard to define and conceptualize the child audience as an audience. Audiences are not empirical formations in the world; they are ideological constructions that make dispersed and complex groups intelligible.

The "kids getting older younger" 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 wider foothold, so do the characteristics and representatives of children's culture filter even more broadly into mainstream popular and consumer culture. It is not just children who adapt to a mature public sphere of consumption; the broader consumer world also adapts itself to the increasing presence of children. Nickelodeon is a case in point, where its presentation of childhood as intrinsically separate through tropes of camp, irony, and grossness had the effect of attracting adult audiences to the children's channel (Banet-Weiser 2007: 5), thus creating opportunities for crossing age boundaries even while defining

the categories more distinctly (Hendershot 2004: 184). Another example might include the priority placed on "cuteness" in Japanese popular culture, which filters into the global imagination through brands like Pokémon, *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, and Hello Kitty that are marketed through video games, television shows, websites, toys, and trading cards (Allison 2006; Ito 2007; Lai 2005; Yano 2013). Buckingham and Sefton-Green propose that the global success of Pokémon was part of a trend positioning "children's culture in the forefront of developments in global capitalism" (2003: 396), especially through a (childish) emphasis on active engagement and social interaction. Similarly, we can extrapolate from Kathryn Montgomery's (2007b) history of US 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 saw as the cultural norms of childhood (the same heightened sociality, immersion, and interactivity that made Pokémon both so childish and so widely successful). Innovative early 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 later 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 played out in a unique way in the children's music industry. On the one hand, children increasingly consumed mainstream musical products, sometimes directly and sometimes repackaged by brands like Kidz Bop. On the other hand, children's artists themselves began to play an increasingly prominent role in popular culture. Not simply attracting adult audiences to their niche media, young artists worked to colonize mainstream radio and television forums without shedding key elements of their childish presence. Furthermore, as children's music gained commercial traction during a period of financial retrenchment for the rest of the music industry, long-standing business models from children's media—based on merchandising, product licensing, media mixes and integrated branding, and direct marketing—began to filter into the wider music industry. Thus the bidirectionality of influence is key to the constitution of children's popular music as a successful and growing field.

Disney music executives explicitly aspired to "launch some of its acts into the mainstream, adult audience and all" (Dodd 2007). Tween pop went out of its way not only to be recognizably in pop genres, but also to actively participate in the mainstream of popular music. Artists like Justin Bieber, the Jonas Brothers, Miley Cyrus, and Taylor Swift all had genre identifications beyond simply "tween" (R&B, rock, pop-country, and singer-songwriter country, respectively). Most of the tween music produced in the 2000s by these acts was not marked as childish in terms of musical style or genre. They foregrounded young voices, but otherwise the musical arrangements, production, and style fit neatly in conventional music genres. It was extramusical elements, like the primary-color packaging of Kidz Bop CDs or the depiction of artists in childish settings like schools or surrounded by child fans, that framed these products as being for children. This was one of the key factors distinguishing tween music from earlier children's music: it went out of its way to fit fully within the conventions of mainstream pop, and did as little as possible to clean up those conventions—so while song lyrics downplayed physical sex, they were still full of heterosexual romance, pop music's central subject (Frith and McRobbie 1978/79).

Tween pop was unlike other kids' media with significant adult appeal, like Pixar movies, *Sesame Street*, or even contemporary "kindie" music with its indie-rock sophistication and folk-revival authenticity. The tween acts' model was not the double address, pioneered by *Sesame Street*, of winking jokes for adults hidden within a childish surface, in which material that goes over kids' heads ultimately affirms adults' sophistication and confirms children's media's essential marginality. As A. O. Scott described the 2001 animated feature *Shrek*, "it won over adults (and a good many critics) by pandering to their curious need to feel smarter than the children sitting next to them, conquering the audience by dividing it" (2002: AR11). The tween model also did not seek out adults through nostalgia and sentimentality about "classic" childhood stories as a timeless cultural archive to which Disney's animated musical films aspire. Instead the tween acts made no concessions to adult taste. That is, they made concessions to the forms of mainstream pop music, but they doubled down precisely on those forms of popular music that were seen already as the most childish, feminized, and abject. If anything they fully subjected themselves to adult critiques of pop commercialization, the force of which is magnified by the further charge of infantilism and manipulation. Top 40 pop—itself long associated with youth but also especially with women audiences and performers—is already normatively subject to highly gendered critiques of its authenticity

from grown-ups and from authenticity-oriented and generically masculinist genres like rock, hip-hop, and country (Coates 2003; Frith and McRobbie 1978/79; Weisbard 2014). The canonical charge that "she doesn't even write her own songs," which stands in as the metonym for a whole range of inauthenticities (Coates 2003: 66), applies with extra force to kid performers working within the corporate Disney "machine," in which, presumably, they are manipulated into making irresistible music that then manipulates their child audiences.

How is this different from the long history of preadolescent girls' participation as key audiences for pop music—especially the cultural figure of the "teenybopper," which Natalie Coulter identifies as "perhaps the closest precursor to the tween" (2014: 57)? The figure of the tween, and the media and consumer industries that organized around it, is not a radical break with that history, but rather a reinvestment in and transformation of it. My view is that the underlying social structures changed very little. Instead the tween moment was largely an effort to renarrate children's—especially girls'—existing participation in public media culture in ways that would better support corporate efforts to capitalize on it. In particular the tween moment sought to resolve or deflect conceptual challenges that inhered in earlier moments, and it sought to articulate the social role that was central to phenomena like Beatlemania, teenybop, bubblegum, and teen pop as a more stable consumer demographic that could better reward long-term capital investments.

A significant difference between "tween" and "teenybopper" is that teenybopper has associations upward, into full adolescence, while tween has associations that are largely downward, into childhood. Norma Coates notes that the term "teenybopper" was "originally bandied about in entertainment industry trade magazines as shorthand for the pre- and mid-teen adolescent cohort and 'their' music," and it would eventually be applied so broadly that "it doesn't matter whether the teenyboppers in question are 9 or 17" (2003: 68). Other scholars writing about teenyboppers and other instances of girls' leading participation in mass cultural phenomena similarly identify the core age groups as linking preadolescents with full teenagers. Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs describe Beatlemania (the mass participation of girls in the enthusiastic reception of the Beatles upon their arrival in the States), as focused on "ten- to fourteen-year-old girls" (1986: 14). That overlaps well with "tween," but they locate Beatlemania entirely in the social and cultural context of 1960s "teenage girl culture"—focusing on a *Life* magazine profile of a seventeen-year-old girl named Jill Dinwiddie (1986: 19) and citing Pat Boone's 1958 book *'Twixt*

Twelve and Twenty, which locates the problem of adolescence centrally in heterosexual contact. Ilana Nash (2003) similarly writes about her own identification as a thirteen-year-old teenybopper in the 1970s, focusing on the compatibility of teenybop culture with second-wave feminist discourse and girls' politicized claims to sexual autonomy—linking teenyboppers not only to teenagers but also to adult women and feminist movements. The category "teenager" is dominant in such accounts, even if the chronological age of the people involved overlaps broadly with those included in the category "tween." That is, while the core group and its practices may have remained largely consistent, prior to the tween moment the discourse around pre-teen girls' musical participation largely centered around terms like "teenager," which, during the middle of the twentieth century, was a rapidly expanding social category that was capacious enough to sometimes include ten-year-olds. The tween moment involved an active effort on the part of media and consumer companies to re-segment their audiences by age: separating what were now called tweens out from the broader categories of teen/youth and rehousing them in spaces marked as childish, such as explicitly child-focused brands like Disney—and then attempting to expand outward again from this new center. Again, that is a more complicated story than growing-older-younger.

THE TWEEN AS CONSUMERIST, WHITE, AND FEMININE

Reframing child audiences in this way required fleshing out the figure of the tween with specific social and cultural markers, especially around gender and race. Like the discourse of infantilization, tween discourse frames the cultural problem it addresses as a problem of age categories, but upon interrogation it also reveals a deep and overriding concern with other identity markers, especially gender, consumption, and race. The tween category's age boundaries, which range widely across childhood and adolescence, are capacious and open-ended, while it is constructed much more rigidly in terms of consumerism, whiteness, and femininity.

A marketing category from its inception, the concept of tweens depends on the notion that consumerism is itself an essential or intrinsic aspect of childhood. But cultural constructions of childhood depend on an ideological opposition of innocence and sheltered domesticity against publicity and commerce, a privileged site as yet unalienated by capitalism (Stephens 1995; Zelizer 1985). The same innocence, naïveté, and credulousness that are supposed to make children unsuited for public roles like working for

pay also mark children as particularly susceptible to the pleasures and intrusions of consumer culture. Cook and Kaiser note an "inextricable link between the age category of 'tween-ness' and the marketplace" (2004: 204), and Beryl Langer points out that perhaps the most notable feature of the children's culture industry is "the designation of childhood as a cultural space constituted by consumption" (2004: 260). These claims may be only the correlate of Barber's position that the activities and expectations of consumption are by definition juvenile. But the view of children as natural consumers is a paradoxical and challenging one that the category "tween" treats as settled and easy. That parents, educators, academics, and journalists increasingly used the term as an everyday descriptor of particular children demonstrates that marketers successfully invested their ambitious new subdivision of the consumer market with the authority of a developmental phase. Tween entertainment successes were commonly reported on as business news and described in the media as "marketing phenomena," but almost never simply reviewed by critics like other new music releases. News reports about acts like Hannah Montana / Miley Cyrus or *High School Musical* invariably included comments from "marketing" consultants who gush about Disney's marketing prowess (e.g., S. Armstrong 2009; Farmer 2007; Keveney 2007; Mason 2007; Quemener 2008). Such stories related astonishment at kids' enthusiasm for high-quality media products and suggest a sense of distrust of kids' discernment—a view that kids' commercial activities are necessarily manipulated by commercial interests, and that the whole thing is just commerce, without the possibility of rising to the level of authentic cultural production and participation. Child audiences, from this perspective, are not discerning audiences or connoisseurs with defined tastes; they are simply and definitively consumers.

Furthermore the central focus on age in defining tweens obscures important ways in which the category is racialized and gendered. To the extent that tween discourses emphasize age while backgrounding race and gender, such discourses participate in a wider contemporary ideology of postracial and postfeminist identity. A substantial body of scholarship argues convincingly that cultural efforts to disavow the politics of race and gender ultimately reproduce white supremacist and patriarchal social norms (Bonilla-Silva 2013; McRobbie 2009). In some ways the tween phenomenon has a more complicated relationship to race and ethnicity than to gender, because since at least the 1990s, children's media has been more proactive than adult media about multicultural representations and diverse casting. Angharad Valdivia (2008) notes that in the 2000s Disney Channel shows

and films, including *That's So Raven*, *Johnny Tsunami*, *High School Musical*, and *The Cheetah Girls* included actors of color in central roles, even occasionally as leads, and ensemble casts were racially diverse (see also Blassingille 2014). This broke strongly with the established tradition at Disney, whose films had long not only foregrounded white characters but were actively racist in their depictions of nonwhite characters. Valdivia points out that Disney's increasing racial diversity at that time for the most part supported Disney's portrayals of consumerist affluence, with Disney identifying something "spectacular" in mixed-race portrayals to contrast "quotidian" whiteness (2008: 285). Many scholars argue that such efforts ultimately flatten social and cultural difference into a single parameter of consumer "choice" that reifies dominant racial hierarchies even as it appears to undermine them. Sarah Turner argues that despite the multiculturalism on its surface, "the channel's diversity is in fact representative of this new colorblind racism, presenting diversity in such a way as to reify the position and privilege of white culture and the white cast members" (2014: 239). Sarah Banet-Weiser (2007) similarly has argued that Nickelodeon's inclusion of actors and characters of color on its shows was part of a commodification of race and identity that homogenizes social difference and assimilates all racial identifications into an affluent, and presumptively white, cultural norm. By superficially acknowledging racial and ethnic diversity in casting, corporate media institutions implicitly claim to have accounted for social difference and in doing so free themselves to continue their ongoing efforts to target an affluent and culturally normative audience.

Commercial media's implicit claims to have taken race and racism into account through their diverse casting parallel an equivalent phenomenon in "postfeminist" media that, according to Angela McRobbie, "positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved" (2009: 12). In doing so, postfeminist claims to have taken feminism into account provide an ironic foundation for the retrenchment of traditional gender norms. Thus, the construction of tweens as girls is intimately tied up with their status as consumers and their racial coding as white. Children's media companies, with Disney at the forefront, narrated their own projects in the 1990s and 2000s as the pursuit of older and more sophisticated child audiences, largely discussed in terms of age and not gender. But ultimately those efforts were very successful at carving out and defining a new media niche for older *girls*, and by the late 2000s those companies were scrambling to attract boy audiences again (Barnes 2009). Similarly Cook and Kaiser note that early media

discourse about tweens was often framed as addressing both boys and girls, though ultimately the primary focus of that discourse was on "the expression of public anxieties about female sexual behavior and mode of self-presentation" (2004: 204). So while the early marketing discourses about tweens were not explicitly gendered, and marketers plainly understood themselves as accounting for both boys and girls when using the term "tween," those same early discourses already revealed a preoccupation with girls and girlhood that would become much more visible by the peak of the tween media and consumer industries in the 2000s.

Childhood and femininity are deeply co-constructed and intersecting categories: women are infantilized and children are feminized (Oakley 1993); female youth and sexual innocence are prized while childhood innocence is eroticized (Kincaid 2004); and women are historically treated as legal and social minors subject to paternal power (Dillon 2004). Moreover, commercial pop music is simultaneously feminized and infantilized (Coates 2003). We can see the intersection of gender and age built into the very concept of "tween." This is because the border of childhood and adolescence represents a fraught and abrupt dividing line specifically constructed in terms of female sexuality and the body that does not apply to boys.[13] Catherine Driscoll argues that the tween girl is defined negatively, "as the gap between the formation of social identity, and thus gender identity, in early childhood and the crescendo of bodily and social change in early adolescence" (2005: 224). This is a long-standing fact in American culture: children's literature scholar Anne Scott MacLeod (1984) coined the phrase "Caddie Woodlawn syndrome" to describe the repeated narration in nineteenth-century children's books of a fraught transition from the free childishness of girlhood to the constrained seriousness and propriety of female adolescence, always framed in terms of preparation for marriage and household maintenance. In these narratives girlhood is not necessarily distinct from boyhood, and outdoor adventure, physical activity, and imaginative play are not seen as improper activities for girls. But upon reaching adolescence, characters like Caddie Woodlawn and *Little Women*'s Jo March are abruptly forced to leave their tomboyish ways behind and dedicate themselves to feminine propriety, in anticipation of marriage. Today the demand that girls begin to police their bodies and sexuality immediately upon puberty remains in force, even as—or because—they are subject to the sexualizing male gaze. Childhood in some ways shelters girls from sexual objectification—or at least, *as children* girls are objectified for their childish innocence rather than their reproductive bodies (Kincaid 1998), even as an objectifying adult gaze anticipates and

prepares girls for the objectifying male gaze (Mulvey 1975). But with the end of childhood there is no longer even that bare ideological shelter from the whole apparatus of feminine propriety. The freedoms of childhood have to be relinquished precisely because they suggest a lack of vigilance about policing the body and sexuality.

Boys, on the other hand, are granted all sorts of middle ground. By contrast to the fraught boundaries maintained by "tween" anxiety about girls' maturation, the cultural logic of what Natalia Cecire calls "puerility" (2012a)—"literally not only childish, but boyish, for a particular notion of what a 'boy' is"—provides a masculine scaffold that allows for the easy coexistence of childishness and maturity. In Cecire's telling, puerility "makes everything into a game." An important addition to Cecire's account of puerility's *form*—"detailed, nitpicky, often rulebound, but always in the service of play"—is its conventional subject matter: the gross-out humor, bathroom jokes, and sexual innuendo that Brian Sutton-Smith terms "phantasmagoria" (1997) and Roderick McGillis calls "coprophilia" (2003). In my view, puerility accommodates masculine development precisely because it combines the finicky demand for rulebound precision and Freudian retentive control with exuberantly childish delight in jokes about bodily excretion. It is, by this definition, simultaneously mature and infantile.

Notably, gross-out humor, bathroom jokes, and sexual innuendo are also characteristic of masculine humor traditions associated with young adult and adult men, with audiences for film franchises like *The Hangover* dominated by young men. Because the gross-out humor of puerility is so concerned with genitals and bodily excretions, puerility ends up being something in which boys can embed their sexuality—and Nash points out that behaviors that get dismissed as boyish immaturity are commonly targeted forcefully at girls, frequently taking the form of "violent or humiliating acts of sexual aggression" (2003: 139). While girls are expected to be asexual children and then, all of a sudden, sexual but proper women, with any gray area being grounds for moral panic, boys get to work in the comfortable terrain of puerility for their whole lives. I would suggest that puerility provides an easy scaffold for boys, from childhood to adulthood, where they can build on what they already know. That means that there are fewer moments when boys or the adults around them find themselves worried about being "between" anything, which means that there is less utility in media and consumer products that address the particular situation of tweens.

As much as age, then, tween discourse implicates the body. Kathleen Rowe points out in her discussion of women and humor that "farting, belching,

and nose-picking convey a similar failure—or refusal—to restrain the body. While boys and men can make controlled use of such 'uncontrollable' bodily functions to rebel against authority, such an avenue of revolt is generally not available to women" (2011: 64). Rowe goes on to quote Nancy Henley that if such bodily functions "should ever come into women's repertoire, it will carry great power, since it directly undermines the sacredness of women's bodies" (1977: 91). A. O. Scott argues that these forms of humor *have* come into women's repertoires, and he explicitly connects the question of women's humor to the infantilization thesis. Noting the rise of women comedians in television and film over the last decade, he writes, "The real issue, in any case, was never the ability of women to get a laugh but rather their right to be as honest as men. And also to be as rebellious, as obnoxious and as childish. Why should boys be the only ones with the right to revolt? . . . Just as the men passed through the stage of sincere rebellion to arrive at a stage of infantile refusal, so, too, have the women progressed by means of regression. After all, traditional adulthood was always the rawest deal for them" (2014: 41, 60). If this question is at the heart of infantilization discourses, it is also precisely the boundary that "tween" addresses. Female comedians finally beginning to be able to successfully market gross-out and physical comedy in the 2000s were navigating the same terrain of cultural anxiety about women's bodies and feminine propriety that, from the other direction, the tween media and consumer industries navigated. Men and boys alike, of course, never had any problem peddling physical comedy and gross-out humor, because their freedom in and ownership of their bodies is not in question.

If childishness allows for a certain freedom and rebellion long enjoyed by men and increasingly by women, and if freedom is something that is significantly lost in girls' transition from childhood to adolescence, is childhood a space of freedom for children? Or is it only a space of freedom by contrast with the confinements of feminine propriety? Put another way, infantilization discourses and tween discourses both put the same three terms in relation: childhood, femininity, and consumerism. And both discourses make specifically historical claims that the contemporary moment, the period following the 1980s, is characterized by a profound shift in that relationship between childhood, femininity, and consumerism. If our historical period is one in which childishness dominates politics, public culture, and the consumer industries, does that mean that in this era children have attained some new power, status, or freedom in politics, public culture, or consumption? I think the obvious answer is no. Following Daniel Cook (2007), I will not argue here in support of a thesis that children

have been "empowered." But reflecting on the compatibility of children's entertainment and consumer culture with the thesis that childishness is uniquely salient in the contemporary moment can provide insights into important questions about the status of identity politics and the changing structures of the public sphere.

Importantly, race is central to all of these questions. Even this basic question of whether childishness offers opportunities for freedom is highly racialized, and ultimately constructs children, and specifically tweens, as white. These questions about girlhood, age, sexuality, and the body have distinctly different implications for girls of color, and Black girls in particular. Ruth Nicole Brown (2009) argues persuasively that discussions of girlhood in media, education, and scholarship exclude Black girls both in the people they focus on and in their underlying goals and values. Robin Bernstein (2011) has influentially argued that the cultural value of childhood innocence has long been constructed in support of white supremacy. Innocence is implicated in many contemporary forms of racial bias and inequity. Contemporary studies suggest that attributions of innocence, and even the status of childhood itself, are frequently denied to Black children. Black girls and boys are both much more likely to be viewed as older than their chronological age, and therefore evaluated by social authorities—police, teachers, and other adults—much more harshly than white peers. Phillip Goff and his colleagues demonstrate that a refusal to acknowledge Black boys as innocent is a distinct form of dehumanization that leads to their increased criminalization (Goff et al. 2014). Similarly, "age compression," the central term in the emergence of tween media, has very different implications for Black girls, as Monique Morris has argued:

> The assignment of more adult like characteristics to the expressions of young Black girls is a form of age compression. Along this truncated age continuum, Black girls are likened more to adults than to children and are treated as if they are willfully engaging in behaviors typically expected of Black women—sexual involvement, parenting or primary caregiving, workforce participation, and other adult behaviors and responsibilities. This compression is both a reflection of deeply entrenched biases that have stripped Black girls of their childhood freedoms and a function of an opportunity-starved social landscape that makes Black girlhood interchangeable with Black womanhood. (2016: 34)

Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia Blake, and Thalia González (2017) term this racialized form of age compression "adultification." Epstein, Blake, and González

argue that the adultification of Black girls includes attributing increased culpability for their actions (and concomitantly harsher punishments) and also heightened sexualization—such that the handwringing about the tension between sexualization and childhood innocence that characterizes tween discourses is largely moot for Black girls. And while tween music appeared to amplify children's, and especially girls', voices in public culture, at the peak of the tween moment Black girls' voices were not visible, and the question of voice is itself a highly racialized one. Kyra Gaunt, for example, argues in an analysis of amateur YouTube performances (a genre that figured heavily in the development of tween pop) that Black girls' "bodies speak more powerfully than their voices" (2015: 252). It is important to be clear, then, that the tween category is constructed as white not only through explicit racial presentations, but also precisely through its intensive investments in gender, sexuality, the body, and the voice, which are always already-racialized categories. I explore these questions directly at various points in this book, especially in chapter 4, but it is important to state plainly that race is always a key factor in cultural constructions of childhood.

THE INTIMATE TWEEN PUBLIC

So what was the tween moment? The sustained efforts by major media corporations to articulate childhood as an identity formation structured through media and consumer culture aspired to produce what Berlant calls an "intimate public" (2008). An intimate public should be a contradiction in terms, as the public sphere canonically is defined and structured in opposition to the intimate spaces of, especially, the patriarchal conjugal family (see, e.g., Habermas [1962] 1989: 43–51). And if the public sphere is normatively mature—rational-critical, deliberative, political, worldly, independent—it should be presumptively out of reach to children qua children (Kulynych 2001). Berlant argues, instead, that "publics presume intimacy" (2008: vii) as they circulate claims of shared feeling and social belonging. The insight of the children's consumer industries in the 2000s was to recognize that childhood's status as a private, domestic position outside of politics was not a hindrance to the cultivation of children as a mass audience but rather the very foundation of that project.

Publics—bourgeois publics, counterpublics, intimate publics—are social phenomena produced through the reflexive circulation of media. A public is fundamentally "a relation among strangers" (M. Warner 2002: 74). Publics, therefore, are always a form of "imagined community," to use Benedict

Anderson's (1983) term for the social fictions of nationalism, the classic site of publicness. Insofar as they entail a claim of affinity or co-participation among strangers, publics imagine a community into being, conjuring familiarity where once there were strangers. Hence for Berlant, intimate publics assert the commonality of individual histories and experiences and by doing so speak those experiences into being:

> What makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff already share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience. A certain circularity structures an intimate public, therefore: its consumer participants are perceived to be marked by a commonly lived history; its narratives and things are deemed expressive of that history while also shaping its conventions of belonging; and, expressing the sensational, embodied experience of living as a certain kind of being in the world, it promises also to provide a better experience of social belonging—partly through participation in the relevant commodity culture, and partly because of its revelations about how people can live. So if, from a theoretical standpoint, an intimate public is a space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general, what's salient for its consumers is that it is a place of recognition and reflection. In an intimate public sphere emotional contact, of a sort, is made. (2008: viii)

Public intimacy is furthermore the work of pop music, whose attachments, Simon Frith argues, are constituted through the "interplay between personal absorption into music and the sense that it is, nevertheless, something out there, something public" (1987: 139). Frith notes that pop's characteristic love songs entail a claim of shared affective experience, in which the exceptionality of intense emotions is figured as ordinary, common, and collective, but not boring or banal:

> Love songs are a way of giving emotional intensity to the sorts of intimate things we say to each other (and to ourselves) in words that are, in themselves, quite flat. It is a peculiarity of everyday language that our most fraught and revealing declarations of feeling have to use phrases—"I love/hate you," "Help me!," "I'm angry/scared"—which are boring and banal; and so our culture has a supply of a million pop songs, which say these things for us in numerous interesting and involving ways. These songs do not replace our conversations—pop singers do not do our courting for us—but they make our feelings seem richer and more convincing

than we can make them appear in our own words, even to ourselves. (1987: 141–42)

Thus pop music is already involved in producing public intimacies—the experience of publicness as a claim of shared affective experience, and in which the exceptionality of intense emotions is figured as ordinary, common, and collective.

The "identities" of identity politics take this public form: they are claims of affiliation, identification, and solidarity among strangers that are produced through the circulation of media, texts, and performances. On its own, face-to-face intimacy is contrary to publicness, which is built on stranger intimacy. Face-to-face relationships are insufficient for the construction of an "identity" in this sense, which requires a status that exceeds the local and the personal.[14] For childhood to achieve that status required, in effect, freeing it from its local particularity and its embedding in communities defined by kinship, friendship, and geography. Ironically, then, the increasing privatization of childhood over the course of the twentieth century in the United States, as children were ushered out of public spaces and into the shelter of the patriarchal conjugal family, was the necessary condition for the conception of childhood as a public identity. Children isolated from one another and confined to the interior of their homes, and therefore increasingly consuming media targeted to them in that state, can no longer understand themselves solely as members of families and neighborhoods but are asked to abstract themselves from those local identifications and newly conceive of themselves as members of a community of strangers who share the status of "child." The tween moment needed to be able to ask children to understand themselves in relation to the abstract category "children" in this way. A tween public creates a category to which children might affiliate that transcends the bounds of family, whereas "normally" children's affiliations of religion, community, class, and ethnicity would be authorized through their primary membership in a family. A tween public is a social formation to which a child may belong even though their parents do not.

Ironically, the construction of a public identity for children that transcends their families depends on portrayals of them as subordinate members of families. That is, abstracting childhood out from its particular instances into a collectively shared status required constructing a set of emotional histories and intimate experiences that are claimed to be normal, generic, and common. The generic affective and emotional attachments that are available to be narrated into the public status of childhood center on the patriarchal

family, on private spaces like bedrooms, and on intimate dyadic friendships. And therefore the construction of childhood as a public identity mandated further investment in a vision of childhood as the opposite of public: private, domestic, dependent, immature, naïve, and innocent. In this way the tween category in the 2000s imagined childhood as a specifically intimate public, one composed of mutual recognition of shared particularity rather than one based on collective transcendence from particularity.

This attempt at constructing an intimate tween public was part of a sort of trial-and-error effort by the children's media industries over decades, in which music would ultimately play a central role. (Incidentally, this is why bubblegum pop and previous efforts at marketing music to kids were qualitatively different projects: they aspired to merely sell stuff to kids, not to radically reimagine childhood as mode of participation in public culture as part of that consumer marketing project.) The particular stakes of what it means to claim childhood as an intimate public are visible in the contrast between tween media in the 2000s, dominated by the Disney Channel, and tween media in the 1990s, dominated by Nickelodeon. Nickelodeon's approach was to address tweens as what Michael Warner (2002) terms a counterpublic: oppositional, independent, politicized, and anti-adult (see Banet-Weiser 2007). The markers of childishness that Nickelodeon leaned on were grossness and puerility, especially with its iconic green slime and accompanying images of delighted children and disgusted adults—foregrounding opposition to adults more than the shared experience of children. The channel used metaphors of literal politics, branding itself as "Nick Nation," deploying discourses of choice and agency, and hosting public spectacles like "Kids Pick the President." Nickelodeon's vision of counterpublic childhood worked to assimilate childhood to the terms of conventional publicness—rather than, say, figuring out how to redefine publicness according to the terms of childhood. But if childhood and politics are defined in part through opposition to one another, treating kids as all but political threatens to dilute what makes them kids. This is a problem similar to the one Warner poses when he points out that participation in public may necessarily be to "adapt . . . to the performatives of rational-critical discourse" (2002: 124) and thereby lose the distinctiveness that makes counterpublicness attractive and socially powerful in the first place. By involving itself in the existing structures of politics, counterpublicness is always at risk of resolving into regular old publicness.

Nickelodeon's efforts did not so much fail as they were superseded. In the 2000s, tween media was dominated by pop music, with its heightened

emotion and emphasis on intimate romance, and by Disney, with its deep investments in the patriarchal family. This formation was much more amenable to a publicness that defined itself not by opposition to a dominant adult culture but through the intimacy of shared affective experience. By putting forward the distinctive view that children "already have something in common and are in need of a conversation that feels intimate, revelatory, and a relief even when it is mediated by commodities" (Berlant 2008: viii–ix), tween media in the 2000s made a claim about belonging that adapted existing models of intimate publicity to childhood. This is not to say that Nickelodeon in the 1990s, with its portrayals of children in terms of literal electoral politics, was "truly" political, while Disney's efforts were depoliticized and feminized. Nickelodeon's campaigns coincided with the peak of an era of political demobilization in the United States in which the child was a central figure of an atrophied and disengaged vision of citizenship (Berlant 1997). That Nickelodeon used politics as a metaphor in its marketing does not mean that it was in fact more political, and it certainly does not mean that it was more successful in its engagements in cultural politics than the modes of public intimacy—and their associations with femininity—that Disney would later put forward. In fact, as I describe in various ways throughout this book, Disney's later approach was almost certainly *more effective* at achieving young people's visible participation in public culture. Many scholars have argued compellingly that girls' media culture is distinctly political: for example, Ehrenreich and her coauthors describe girls' riotous appreciation for the Beatles as "the first and most dramatic uprising of *women's* sexual revolution" (1986: 11), and Nash argues that late 1970s teenybopper culture "gave us the means to participate in a feminist struggle" (2003: 150). My claims in this book are not so strong (I think the jury is still out, and I'm worried especially about how tween media invests in racial hierarchies), but I want to avoid the suggestion that the explosion of tween music in the 2000s reflected a movement away from politicizing childhood, when instead I argue that it sought to reconfigure the cultural politics of childhood.

CHILDREN AND IDENTITY POLITICS

This book, then, is a case study of identity in public and consumer culture. It seeks an understanding of the logic of identity in public life by tracing efforts by corporate and commercial actors to, in effect, add a "new" identity to the mix. By examining childhood specifically from this perspective, this book is also an effort to explore the limits of identity as an analytical, cul-

tural, and historical category. The culture industries clearly see identity as a productive basis for the commercialization of culture and the expansion of consumption and economic relationships into more areas of life (Hochschild 2003; Zelizer 2009). Childhood, in some ways, tests the possibility that the logic of identity can be expanded indefinitely, or if it has some natural limits. That is because in the United States in particular childhood is conventionally defined in opposition to identity—especially insofar as "identity" in the relevant sense implies publicness and politics. Something similar might once have been true about gender as well, and efforts to understand gender as a large-scale social or class relationship rather than a personal, private relationship took generations and are ongoing. Much of that effort was explicitly political: the long task of asserting gender as relevant to politics in the first place involved reconceptualizing the sphere of politics to include personal and intimate relations while reconceiving gendered activities (social reproduction, emotional labor, sex) as public, productive, and political. In parallel the growing consumer industries defined women as a key consumer demographic, treating gender as an abstract national category rather than a particular status of individuals. The identifications that the culture industries appeal to as unique demographics are defined both by politics and by consumption: race and ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality simultaneously mark out consumer demographics and categories of political conflict. But, as Berlant argues, even where women's culture is ambivalent or skeptical about politics it is "juxtapolitical," a formation that "thrives in *proximity* to the political, occasionally crossing over in political alliance, even more occasionally doing some politics, but most often not, acting as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and conceptual recalibration as achievement enough" (2008: x). The same is much harder to say for children's culture, which does not have such access to or convertibility into politics. Of course there are all sorts of politics of childhood, as children, reproduction, and the family are central sites of explicit political conflict around government policy and cultural politics. But those are politics of adults about children. There have been brief historical moments in which childhood or youth were identified as a basis for explicit political action, as in "youth liberation" movements of the 1970s (Youth Liberation of Ann Arbor 1972). But there has been no sustained identity politics of childhood. Conceptually, to understand childhood as a political category would entail no longer understanding it as *childhood*, since childhood in the United States has been defined as a status outside of politics (which is not the same as saying it is irrelevant to politics).

The tween moment, then, was an effort to establish childhood as a purely consumer demographic separate from politics.

Such a bright line between consumption and politics is likely too strong, and of course a long-standing body of scholarship addresses precisely the cultural politics of media and consumer culture. Another long-standing body of criticism sees identity politics as an evacuation of the sphere of "real" (that is, economic) political conflict and a move into the atrophied sphere of cultural politics. In this telling there is a tradeoff between a politics of culture and identity and a (presumptively more real or significant) politics of class and economics—a contrast between, in Nancy Fraser's (1998) terms, the politics of "recognition" and of "redistribution." Fraser notes that "identity politics tend to displace struggles for redistribution" (2000: 110), and she argues that that identity-based movements have had the unintended consequence of bolstering the global expansion of neoliberalism and the increasing economic inequality that comes with it (2009). A range of commentators have elaborated on that complaint (Frank 2004; Michaels 2006; Reed 2013a, 2013b). By contrast Judith Butler (1997), Ellen Willis (2006), and many others argue that what critics see as "merely cultural" values are in fact materially salient and socially powerful. As Willis puts it, "To argue that one's 'material interests' have only to do with economic class is to say that sexual satisfaction or frustration, bodily integrity and autonomy or the lack of same in the sexual and reproductive realm, the happiness or misery of our lives as lovers and spouses, parents and children are ethereal matters that have no impact on our physical being" (2006: 10).

I am not interested here in leveling a critique of identity politics. Instead my goal is to ask what identity politics are capable of. Certainly the development of tween media involved the simultaneous cultivation of a cultural identity and a market category, and there is no question of the compatibility of tween identity with capitalist accumulation. It is possible to read this book and conclude that identity politics is clearly pernicious precisely because it is so empty of real political content and so capaciously deferential to the logic of capitalism that it lets even childhood into its impoverished public spheres. But that perspective implies that a robust public sphere should not be open to childhood, and children should be confined to dependence, privacy, and domesticity. If we do not begin with the prior assumption that childhood or childishness should rightly be excluded from serious social participation, the same position can lead to the conclusion that consumer identity politics, unlike conventional politics, is a utopian formation of the public sphere that is radically inclusive enough to con-

tain even children. From this perspective identity politics is the cultural and historical formation that makes possible children's claims to participation in public life, since conventional politics definitionally do not. For marketing consultant Paco Underhill, consumerist inclusion is literally democratizing: the expansion of the children's consumer industry is "just one more example of how capitalism brings about democratization—you no longer need to stay clear of the global marketplace just because you're three and a half feet tall, have no income to speak of, and are not permitted to cross the street without Mom. You're an economic force, now and in the future, and that's what counts" (2009: 152). But affirming a version of identity politics that is so capacious it can contain even apolitical, dependent childhood may be just as untenable, because it posits the sphere of public life as a space with no material or historical implications, a public sphere without politics. Conventional politics is defined by its exclusion of too many valuable forms of human subjectivity (including childhood); and while consumer politics may have the potential for radical inclusivity (clearly it is not fully inclusive), that is achieved only through the commodification of difference and the flattening of cultural life to consumption. If "the political" itself is an attenuated and impoverished space of sociality that constantly limits and circumscribes what realms of human life are open to negotiation or challenge, we can ask what sorts of group solidarity children might claim (or corporate media might claim for them) outside of "the political" that are still based on a politics of distribution (in the form of consumer expenditures) and of recognition (if within entertainment media rather than political discourse).

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

Popular music was at the core of the tween project in the 2000s, but I consider television, film, advertisements, music videos, merchandise, album artwork, and other texts and objects to be critical to the composition of the tween music industry. Specifically, I argue in chapter 2 that the historical development of the tween music industry was inextricable from the Disney Corporation's broader strategic shift from film to television. Tween pop was centrally *about* music, but that does not mean music was its primary or only medium. It would not make sense to write about tween pop without television, especially, at the forefront.

I also focus in this book on texts and representations, and not on child audiences. My questions are about how the culture industries marshaled

a particular logic of identity to reconceptualize children's relationship to entertainment and public culture. How child audiences received the texts that were offered to them is, of course, a fascinating and important topic. But understanding whether kids found the messages offered them persuasive or even legible is a separate project from accounting for the content of those messages themselves. It is also reasonable to imagine that the most receptive audience for the anxious portrayals of kids in public that I trace in these chapters are adults—the people who are inclined to be anxious about kids' consumption and public participation. A number of scholars are producing excellent work about young people's engagement with popular music, including tween pop, especially Sarah Baker (2001, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2008, 2013), Diane Pecknold and Sarah Dougher (Dougher 2016; Dougher and Pecknold 2018; Pecknold 2017), Ingvild Sørenssen (2014, 2016), and Rebekah Willet (2011).

My desire to understand how tween pop represented kids was motivated by my own experience talking at length with kids in 2007 and 2008 about popular music (Bickford 2017). From those conversations I learned that the kids I was working with were interested in tween pop for a range of reasons, but their emphasis was decidedly different from mine. For example in 2007 I asked a group of nine- and ten-year-olds (the heart of the "tween" demographic) to watch Kidz Bop's video for Kelly Clarkson's 2004 hit "Since U Been Gone," which I analyze closely in chapter 1. The kids focused on the video's animal drawings and costumes—its particularly "childish" elements. Mary repeatedly pointed out the animals that came onscreen, 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." My own analysis focuses heavily on cuts between a bedroom and stage, but none of the kids voluntarily noted this. 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 these 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* and *Sesame Street* or at family theme parks, or, as Jesse noted, by sports mascots. They only acknowledged in response to direct questioning, and then without much interest, 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. This book is mostly about those fantasies.

THE BOOK

The chapters that follow explore the boundaries and composition of the intimate childhood public that was the achievement of the tween moment. Chapter 1, "Singing Along," looks at Kidz Bop, one of the earliest and most successful tween music brands. It focuses on Kidz Bop's 2005 video for "Since U Been Gone," which staged a relationship between children's bedroom culture and fantasies of public performance. I trace a history of similar media portrayals of children in fantastic sites of public performance across advertising, television, and music, which culminated with tween music in the 2000s. I argue that at the core of the tween music industry's efforts to legitimate children's participation in pop music performance and consumption was an argument, put forward through the arrangements of adult and child voices in recordings as well as in fictional narratives and visual metaphors, that children's domesticity was complementary, rather than opposed, to their participation in public culture.

Chapter 2, "Music Television," follows the Disney Channel's turn to popular music programming as part of its rise to prominence within Disney's globally integrated children's media empire. Because Disney was such a central player in the development of tween pop music, understanding the particular corporate history that led to its investment in pop music in the 2000s sheds light on the relationships among music, gender, and childhood that structured the tween moment more broadly. This chapter shows how Disney and its competitors saw pop music as a key tool for attracting older children, whom they had identified as the most important demographic to pursue. Pop music's intimate and feminized address allowed Disney to hail children as independent and influential participants in mainstream culture while avoiding the oppositional, anti-adult approach of its

competitors. While during the 1990s the tween category was broadly seen by marketers as older children, by the 2000s it had been firmly established as categorically composed of girls. Because Disney's turn to pop music involved adopting a gendered address, it was an important contributor to the feminization of tweens. Pop music, then, provided the foundation for Disney's address to child audiences as an intimate public.

Chapter 3, "'Having It All,'" examines the 2006–11 Disney Channel show *Hannah Montana*, starring Miley Cyrus, which narrated the life of a child pop star as the "situation" for a traditional family sitcom. By focusing on the tensions between its protagonist's public life and intimate relationships, *Hannah Montana* accounted for child celebrity as simply a youthful version of the classic postfeminist problem of "work-life balance," in the tradition of *Murphy Brown* or *Sex and the City*. While the show gently adopted a familiar model, the suggestion that somehow "work" and "life" might be in conflict for the show's affluent white child protagonist demanded a new understanding of the relationship of childhood to the family, the economy, and the public sphere. In this way *Hannah Montana* set up a vision of childhood through direct analogy to femininity, and in doing so staged a struggle to achieve intimacy and affective attachments in a world of public and private contradiction as the sentimental basis for childhood identification.

Chapter 4, "The Whiteness of Tween Innocence," explores the role of whiteness as a central marker of innocence and childishness in tween music, especially as its growing mainstream success exposed age as a cultural and social fault line in the mainstream music industry. It focuses on contrasting strategies taken by Miley Cyrus and Taylor Swift as their careers developed beyond tween music. Cyrus provocatively and controversially adopted Black musical styles as part of a clear effort to distance herself from her past as a child star, while Swift continually reinvested in cultural markers of whiteness in her efforts to claim innocence as an organizing theme in her work, and thus deflect commercial impulses toward sexualization. Race, in this case, worked in part as an avatar for age, making whiteness visible as a foundational value of tween music's investments in innocent femininity.

Chapter 5, "The Tween Prodigy at Home and Online," considers the 2011 concert film *Never Say Never*, which narrates Justin Bieber's rise to fame as an embrace of childhood rather than an escape from it. The film explicitly infantilizes its star, highlighting his immaturity, poor decision making, and dependence on paternalistic handlers who are shown to know his own interests better than he did. Bieber's musical talent is framed as childish and domestic, and early recordings of him performing in his family living room

share screen time with shots of him onstage at sold-out auditoriums. This is linked, further, to a specific vision of his audience as similarly confined in their homes. At the climactic moment of his sold-out Madison Square Garden concert, home videos of Bieber performing are paired in a montage with YouTube videos of his fans singing along in their own living rooms and backyards, domesticating the public gathering of a child performer and his young audience as though it were just one more site of childish home performance. Thus, in Bieber's presentation as a child star, domesticity and immaturity are not constraints to be overcome, but instead they are precisely the highly visible traits that authenticate children's public performance and consumption.

The conclusion takes up my periodization of the "tween moment" as the decade from 2001 to 2011, to argue that starting in 2011 tween music entered a new phase. It returns to the peak years of 2008 and 2009 to affirm the tense cultural politics around tween music in this period, noting especially prominent expressions of tween artists' solidarity with one another and in opposition to adults. It then considers developments since 2011 that suggest that the "tween moment" may have ended, and that children's relationships to the media industries and public culture have stabilized. It looks at four examples of changes since 2011: Kidz Bop's shift away from its long-standing emphasis on amateur child voices; Disney's return to animated musical feature films with the success of *Frozen*; changes in the status of Black artists and Black musical forms in tween music; and the mainstreaming of tropes of childishness in broader adult popular music. While not a comprehensive account of recent tween music and media, these examples suggest that many of the considerations that motivated the tween music industry's particular investments during its period of emergence and expansion appear to have become less salient than they were during the "tween moment."

NOTES

Introduction: The Tween Moment

1 "What Time Is It," lyrics by Matthew R. T. Gerrard and Robert S. Nevil, © 2006 Walt Disney Music Company.

2 More details and findings from this study can be found in *Schooling New Media* (Bickford 2017).

3 Weikle-Mills identifies a similar tension between children's formal disempowerment and celebrations of their imaginative freedom in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: at the same time that dominant legal discourses fixed children's status as "irrational and incapable of action," artistic and cultural responses to influential liberal-democratic theories increasingly depicted "children's political actions, capacities, and responsibilities in an imaginary, literary realm" (Weikle-Mills 2013: 14). The dialectical history I am outlining here also has significant parallels to the argument made by scholars of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature that the modern public sphere and its associated subjectivities emerged in part as a result of the domestic confinement of women. This is a complicated and controversial account that I do not have the tools to treat fully here, but see Thompson (2009), N. Armstrong (1987), and McKeon (2005) for various perspectives that may offer useful lenses on twenty-first-century childhoods.

4 Friedan explicitly associates the confinement of women to domestic work with "immaturity" (1963: 79).

5 Weikle-Mills argues that infantilization is a particular practice that emerged as part of modern liberal-democratic political cultures: "Infantilization as a form of domination affecting specific groups rather than all political subjects [as under patriarchal regimes] was tied to the emergence of childhood as a special category for persons who were unable to participate in their own governance" (2013: 96).

6 Postman's book borrows heavily from an argument made by his PhD student, Joshua Meyrowitz, in a chapter of his dissertation, which would later become *No Sense of Place* (1985), an influential work of media theory.

7 Weikle-Mills argues what Berlant calls "infantile citizenship" is not new to the Reagan era but is rather "an integral and longstanding part of America's political history" (2008: 37) going back at least to the Revolution and founding. It is important to note the long histories of both infantilization panics and the real cultural phenomenon in which citizenship and social membership are envisioned as modes of childishness or dependence, what Weikle-Mills calls "affectionate citizenship" (2013). My goal here is to outline the eruption of a particular instance of this panic at the turn of the millennium, which coincided with other notable changes in cultural understandings of age and childhood, especially the development of discourses about tweens, and the contradictory phenomenon of children's domestic confinement and mediated freedom.

8 Psychologist Dan Kiley's *The Peter Pan Syndrome: Men Who Have Never Grown Up* (1983) had similarly linked supposed failures to achieve adult maturity with incomplete masculinity (see Kidd 2011: 86–88).

9 In 2008 reactionary *Washington Times* columnist Diana West published *The Death of the Grown-Up: How America's Arrested Development Is Bringing Down Western Civilization* (2008), a right-wing jeremiad about baby boomer immaturity somehow exposing the United States to the threat of global terrorism. Childhood scholar Gary Cross's version of this argument emphasized gender, identifying a widespread lack of maturity in men, which like Barber he blames substantially on "our embrace of a commercial culture that feeds on stunted human growth" (2008: 2). In 2009 the State University of New York Press published the academic collection *Perpetual Adolescence: Jungian Analyses of American Media, Literature, and Pop Culture* (Porterfield, Polette, and Baumlin 2009), and its contributions explored how the "myth of puer" (a Jungian archetype) defines contemporary American culture. In 2014 Stanford literature professor Robert Pogue Harrison published the more ponderous but ultimately similar *Juvenescence: A Cultural History of Our Age.*

10 By contrast Natalia Cecire (2012b) has argued persuasively that a significant strand of contemporary political discourse might reflect childish investments, but through the culturally *masculine* logic of "puerility"—an obsessive commitment to playful stakes-free rule following that characterizes journalism about statistical forecasting, for example—and not the infantilized femininity that Barber and the rest worry about.

11 In 2006 Walt Disney Records marketing executive Damon Whiteside described the *High School Musical* audience this way: "Our really core demographic . . . would be 8 to 14, though it can go younger, and there are probably some older kids buying it that wouldn't admit it. . . . And with the *Kidz Bop* albums, we have a little bit of the same audience, but we definitely skew older. I think *Kidz Bop* is an under-10 thing, and I think our majority is gonna be over 10, reaching into the 14s and 15s" (Willman 2006).

12 After Brown and Washton published reports on the tween market in 2001 and 2002 that uncritically passed along the age-compression narrative, their follow-up reports in 2003 and 2004 reversed course, noting that "tweens remain firmly anchored in childhood" (2003: 19). In fact they argued that due to undesired social changes—they cite divorce, bullying, and terrorism—"kids are getting older younger not because they want to but because they have to," and that kids turn to childhood, especially "the security and comfort provided by their parents and their home," as shelter against those challenges (209). Brown and Washton argued that tweens had effectively adopted for themselves adult anxieties about a threatening external world. Rather than clamoring for increased independence, they consented to their extended confinement in childhood and the home: "the desire of middle-schoolers to remain firmly entrenched in childhood has become even more apparent in recent years because tweens have come to perceive the world as a more dangerous place than before" (209).

13 In a cover story for *Newsweek*, journalist Abigail Jones (2014) suggests that the experience of being a tween girl is definitively about sexuality.

14 See Dueck (2013) for helpful theorization of the differences between face-to-face and stranger sociality.

Chapter One: Singing Along

1 *Kidz Bop* volume 1 was released in 2001. Another CD, *More Kidz Bop*, was released with a copyright date of 2000. That album is not included in the discographies I have consulted, and Razor and Tie's own self-description as well as contemporaneous reporting identify 2001 as the inauguration of the series. Very little information is available about *More Kidz Bop*, which appears to be a secondary release that may have gone to press too early. In any event, *More Kidz Bop* was not a significant release, and I stick with the standard dating of Kidz Bop to 2001.

2 See McNutt (2015) for a comprehensive analysis of Kidz Bop lyrics, which suggests that the recordings' lyrics have become more sanitized and conservative since 2009. I discuss Kidz Bop's changing approach since 2009 from a different perspective in the conclusion.

3 "1, 2 Step," lyrics by Alexander Phalon, Melissa Elliot, and Ciara Harris. © 2004 EMI April Music Inc.

4 Kidz Bop no longer hosts the video on its own website, but as of August 2019, the video can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5MC8u27prw. The DVD credits the video's production and direction to Wormseye Films, with no other information.

5 This idea of the interior of the home as the location for a portal to a fantasy space in which children have heightened value and agency is itself familiar from classic children's fantasy. In novels like George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the*