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Anna Hickey-Moody

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Youth agency and adult influence: A critical revision of little publics

Anna Hickey-Moody

In this article I strengthen and develop the theoretical platform for my concept of little public spheres (Hickey-Moody 2013, 2014, 2015). I do so to present the concept as a tool for theorists who want to consider the political significance of marginalized youth. The concept of little publics is a theoretical frame I developed (2013, 2014, 2015) to show how the acts, styles, and life choices of young people are civic actions that have, or can have, political significance (Hebdige 1979; Bennett 1999). Reading young people's acts as an expression of their opinion, as youth voice, little publics shows how voice is made from the materiality of action. I begin this article with a definition of how I use little public spheres. I situate the concept in a history of scholarship on the public sphere, intimate and globalizing publics, public pedagogy and youth voice. I articulate how and why I have developed the concept to think through youth voice and youth agency. I offer a critical reflection on my earlier writings on this topic, which were similarly developed to understand young people's arts practice as a mode of civic participation, and, I suggest, my previous work has not sufficiently mobilized the theoretical framework I attempted to build. Here I add nuance to the theoretical framework with a view to the concept "travelling" across cultural studies, educational studies, sociology, politics, or disciplines concerned with young lives. The article closes with suggestions for how the concept of little public spheres might be taken up by those interested in youth citizenship, civics, and publics.

Little public spheres

The concept of little public spheres is my youth-specific development of contemporary theories of counterpublics (Fraser 1990; Warner 1992; Berlant 1997), which I bring together with recent debates about public and cultural pedagogy (Burdick, Sandlin, and O'Malley 2014; Watkins, Noble, and Driscoll 2015; Savage 2010). I have argued (Hickey-Moody 2013, 2014, 2015) that the term *public pedagogy* offers an education-specific version of Habermas's (1962), Fraser's (1990), and Berlant's (1997) discussions of publics and counterpublics. To understand how cultural processes of learning are a part of youth arts practices and are also affected by youth arts performances, we need

to think through the publics that young communities mobilize, speak to, and in which they perform an investment. Political thought (Habermas 1962; Calhoun 1992; Emden and Midgley 2012) and cultural studies of youth (Cohen 1972) are both marked by concerns about the constitution of the public sphere and the impact of public discourses on young lives. I attempt to consolidate some of these concerns with a focus on what they might mean for youth; that is, who are the publics in which young people are invested? I ask what a youth voice in a public sphere might be, how youth voice is constituted, what the institutional conditions required for its constitution are, and the extent to which young people may or may not have agency in public discourses. These questions are global, and of such reach that they cannot be resolved with a singular answer. The asking of these questions, though, brings young bodies, lives, loves, and styles into relation with academic political discourses on the public sphere, the role of affects of youth in the public sphere, and the development of this relationship can be seen as an end in itself.

One of the earliest writers on the public sphere was the American pragmatist John Dewey, who in *The Public and its Problems* (1927) developed a concept of the public sphere as a space in which citizens assemble to respond to negative effects of market or governmental activities. Dewey begins his work on the public by thinking through the political orientations of the public and private spheres, perceptively noting that acts undertaken in the “public sphere” are often not concerned with the public good per se. Dewey reminds us: “There is therefore no necessary connection between the private character of an act and its non-social or anti-social character. The public, moreover, cannot be identified with the socially useful. One of the most regular activities of the politically organized communities has been waging war” (1927, 14).

As theorists such as Barrett (2012), Berlant (2008), Fraser (1990), and Lincoln (2012) show in very different ways, and in relation to contexts as diverse as mobile phone use, the representation of women in public culture, the gendered constitution of the public sphere and young bedrooms, the political orientations of public and private realms are complicated and rely on each other. As early as 1927 Dewey shows the alliance between public or private should be made not on the place in which the act was taken but rather on the political effect of the act:

Just as behaviour is not anti-social or non-social because privately undertaken, it is not necessarily socially valuable because carried on in the name of the public by public agents. The argument has not carried us far, but at least it was warned us against identifying the community and its interests with the state or the politically organized community. (1927, 15)

Acting in the name of the public serves to build very particular kinds of privates. For Dewey, then, divisions between public and private are “to be

drawn on the basis of the extent and scope of the consequences of acts which are so important as to need control, whether by inhibition or by promotion” (1927, 15).

Even in this early work of Dewey lies the complexity and ambiguity of the actuality of, or possibility of, a public–private divide. Arriving at a definition of a public sphere as that which responds to “acts which are so important as to need control” (1927, 15) is a useful, if somewhat broad, beginning. If I could extend this start point affectively, to include “feelings which are so significant as to need expression,” Dewey’s thought might offer a frame that is capable of considering the significance of affective responses. Interestingly, Dewey also characterizes interest-based societies that might be called little publics, or what elsewhere (Hickey-Moody 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015) I have referred to, perhaps too hopefully, as Dewey’s little publics. These interest-based group are societies, or associations based on culture–religion, race, hobbies (arts and sport), and labor. Dewey states:

There are societies, associations, groups of an immense number of kinds, having different ties and instituting different interests. They may be gangs, criminal bands; clubs for sport, sociability, and eating; scientific and professional organizations, political parties and unions within them; families, religious denominations, business partnerships ... and so on. ... The associations may be local, nation-wide and trans-national. (1927, 69–70)

Clearly, affect, emotion, desire, belief, and political vision are brought together through action in these societies, and such interest is performed in located, embedded ways and also in trans-national contexts. To take this idea as a starting point for a genealogy of little public spheres, contemporary media practices of production-consumption obviously need to be considered as affectively activating trans-national relationships in particular ways.

These overlapping, interest-based societies serve to socialize people in a similar way to schools, albeit without the unremitting instruction employed in schools and with more space for agency:

The young have to be brought within the traditions, outlook, and interests that characterize a community by means of education: by unremitting instruction and by learning in connection with the phenomena of overt association (1927, 154).

Here, a link between what might be called public pedagogy, or the pedagogy of culture and recreation is clearly recognized as being central to the constitution of public culture, and more broadly, I would say this obviously includes young lives. Schools and societies have differing relations to the public, as does art, or creative practices that are characterized by Dewey as preconditions for creating adequate opinions:

The freeing of the artist in literary presentation, in other words, is as much a precondition of the desirable creation of adequate opinions on public matters as is the

freeing of social inquiry. Men's conscious life of opinion and judgement often proceeds on a superficial and trivial plane. But their lives reach a deeper level. The function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. Common things, a flower, a gleam of moonlight, the song of a bird, not things rare and remote, are means with which the deeper levels of life are touched so that they spring up as desire and thought. This process is art. Poetry, the drama, the novel, are proofs that the problem of presentation is not always insoluble. Artists have always been the real purveyors of news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception and appreciation. (Dewey 1927, 184)

On one level I agree with Dewey that “The function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness” (Dewey 1927, 184). I would also add that as much as the function of some forms of art has been to break through the crust of conventionalized consciousness, other popular—but also avant-garde—forms of art, create conventionalized consciousness, or public sentiment, through constituting the conventional and through re-defining the conventional by holding it in relief.

In offering this selective review of Dewey's work on the constitution of the public sphere and the role of the arts within it, I have to point out that minors are not really considered by Dewey as legitimate members of the public sphere. Nor are the disabled, or mentally ill. As such, machining the public in unconventional ways is made theoretically impossible. To qualify for participation in the public sphere, the individual must be equipped with the “intelligence” needed to engage in political affairs and certain conditions must be met—those of suffrage, elections of officials, and majority rule to ensure rulers reflect the desires and interests of the public. Dewey asserts, “unless ascertained specifications are realised, the Community cannot be organized as a democratically effective public” (1927, 157).

The exclusion of youth from the public sphere is characterized in terms of protection:

A fourth mark of the public is indicated by the idea that children and other dependants (such as the insane, the permanently helpless) are peculiarly its wards. When parties involved in any transaction are unequal in status, the relationship is likely to be one-sided, and the interests of one party to suffer. ... Legislatures are more likely to regulate the hours of labour of children than of adults, of women than of men. (1927, 62).

There are two ways I want to problematize this statement. If children are to be excluded from the public sphere they are also denied voice in the public realm and are subjugated to the opinions and positions of adults. Secondly, as generations of feminists have shown (notably, Fraser 1990) women's working hours are certainly not regulated, with the majority of domestic and reproductive labor being undertaken by women, and this labor is relied on by the public but positioned as being well outside the remit of public concern.

I take Dewey's interests, his political project, as a starting point, without completely acquiescing to his specific characterization of the public. What if young people could be included in the public realm? What would they say and *how would they say it*? Young people need to be regarded as more than the soil in which seeds of social value are sown¹ (Dewey 1927, 177), they are an active part of the process of developing social value. Unlike Dewey, I want to suggest we take young people's actions in making little publics seriously, that the materiality of their arts practices constitutes a form of citizenship.

In 1962 Habermas published *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* with seemingly little regard for Dewey's earlier work on the subject. Habermas brought a particular iteration of the public as a social sphere comprised of a critical audience into scholarly debate. For Habermas (1962), the *public sphere* is a democratic space that fosters debate among its members on topics concerned with the advancement of public "good" (1962, 99). Drawing on Greek configurations of public and private spaces and modes of social operation, Habermas characterizes the public sphere as a space in which "citizens ... interacted as equals with equals" (1962, 4). Although this space of citizenship is clearly signposted as a bourgeois arena, Habermas (1962) ironically characterizes debate within the public sphere as socially inclusive, "as a realm of freedom and permanence" (1962, 4). It is a space that, due to its access to economic and social resources, is separated from the power of the church and the government, as it is comprised of capitalists:

[M]erchants, bankers, entrepreneurs, and manufacturers [who] ... belonged to that group of the "bourgeois" who, like the new category of scholars, were not really "burghers" [comfortable members of the middle class] in the traditional sense. This stratum of "bourgeois" was the real carrier of the public. (1962, 23)

Habermas qualifies that the texts the public read are not *necessarily* "scholarly"—indeed he introduces the concept of the public sphere through discussing an actor performing for his audience (1962, 14). He draws on German linguist Johann Adelung, who considers how different texts gather divergent publics by drawing "a distinction between the public that gathered as a crowd around a speaker or an actor in a public place, and the *Lesewelt* (world of readers). Both were instances of a 'critical (*richtend*) public'" (Habermas 1962, 26). The attention of audience is crucial here, then. Sites of performance or display, be they distributed or localized, constitute little publics as long as they draw audiences to attention.

The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere maintains an ongoing discussion of the relationship between different viewing publics and textual forms. This line of inquiry later inspired a scholarly field on media and their publics (Butsch 2000, 2007, 2008; Higgins 2008). As a crowd assembled to

watch a performance of Hamlet, or an audience gathered together to view a performance text, a localized given public might be quite small. Different textual forms (newspapers, journals, plays and so on) thus operate as divergently employed “public organs” (Habermas 1962, 2) that configure distinct critical publics. In their multiple forms, little publics are both virtually mediated (through the internet, new media) and physically located (neighborhoods, schools, arts groups, sports clubs). A constitutive feature of any given public is a concern with advancing a common good, a concern,

transcending the confines of private domestic authority and becoming a subject of public interest, that zone of continuous administrative contact became “critical” also in the sense that it provoked the critical judgment of a public making use of its reason. (Habermas 1962, 24)

An investment in some iteration of democratic ideals and thinking about society is thus a constitutive feature of a “public” and certainly lies at the heart of the reasons why an interest or activity is presented as being good for young people. The value, or goodness, of an activity is also usually synonymous with adult and/or institutional involvement and accompanies the way interest is mediated across public culture (Calhoun 1992; Coleman and Ross 2010).

In her now famous response to Habermas, Fraser (1990) shows that marginalized social groups are excluded from any possibility of a “universal” public sphere. She contests the suggestion that such a space, as it currently exists, is actually inclusive. For Fraser, marginalized groups form their own publics: “subaltern counterpublics” or just “counterpublics.” These groups speak back to, or critique, social investments that further the interests of the bourgeois, who Fraser characterizes as “masculinist” through stating, “[w]e can no longer assume that the bourgeois conception of the public sphere was simply an unrealized utopian ideal: it was also a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule” (1990, 62). The notion of independent “citizens” is masculinist because to function in the public sphere, one must rely on a certain level of domestic (private, usually female) labor. Warner (1992) also critiques Habermas’s notion of “the public” for excluding marginalized bodies in ways that require a disavowal of the embodied nature of social difference. Youth arts in and outside schools often include and speak to marginalized bodies (O’Brien and Donelan 2008). In doing so, youth arts can assemble publics who extend beyond the social category of the bourgeois. Through creating performances that articulate young people’s voice in social contexts, youth arts make some little public spheres of resistance (“counterpublics”), but many little publics are moderately mainstream performances of civic investment. Performances articulate youth voice through embodied style as a performance of taste, which is a form of social commentary and critique. Through calling an audience to attention, youth performances create “affective and emergent publics”

(Bruns et al. 2010, 9) which are “structured by affect as much as by rational-critical debate. Such engagement can occur in and through popular culture ... and everyday communication ... By decentering more formalized spaces of rational debate” (Bruns et al. 2010, 9).

Along with a clear conception of a dominant cultural position, the idea of *counterpublics* requires an investment in some kind of political or cultural opposition, an investment that is not necessarily aligned with the nature of youth arts activities. It seems to me that, to understand the values espoused and the nature and extent of democratic work undertaken in youth arts projects in and out of schools, we are better off thinking about multiple publics (see Savage 2010) than counter publics (resistant) and publics (majoritarian spaces of political consensus). As Berlant (1997) shows in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, and Dewey (1927) foreshadowed in *The Public and Its Problems*, citizenship is a creative process that requires subcultures. Thinking through little publics allows for the articulation of discrete forms of citizenship that articulate through belonging to, and participating in, youth arts subcultures, which effectively constitute little publics when they create a work or text that calls an audience to attention. For example, subcultures have divergent relationships to the broader legal public sphere and articulate through style. Those performing musical theatre in concert halls do so to occupy a very different place in public life than those listening to rap music in their bedrooms, or dancing at a rave. The differences in such communities are flagged by the multiplicity in and of little publics.

Considering the little publics that youth art/s create, and to which they speak, is a line of inquiry that allows the discursive positions young people assemble through art to be read in relation to broader narratives of youth produced by popular media. It positions arts-based youth events as legitimate sites of cultural inquiry and sources of knowledge about the lives and opinions of young people. Explicit considerations of the process of public making—and associated experiences of citizenship—that are effected and affected through youth arts practices offer ways of better understanding the civic voices of those who might not have the knowledges to participate in more formal civic settings for articulating youth voice. The communities that young people create (and to which they belong) through practicing in and out of school youth art/s are obviously influenced by the pedagogical effects of popular media texts such as those discussed by Williams (1958, 1966). As such, considering the little publics created by youth arts texts and practices extends scholarship on cultural value and on public pedagogy. What begins as affect, style, as art practice, effects modes of community attachment that can influence public sentiment and can provide frameworks for policy and legislation.

Arts practices in and out of school can be considered a form of public pedagogy²—they are part of what Williams and Willis refer to as “common culture,” and they utilize formats that are publicly accessible. In making

and speaking to very particular local-global communities, arts practices constitute little publics. In the case of arts practices for youth run by adults, these little publics are often groups invested in “the power of the arts” to better society through including marginalized young people in “mainstream” culture and “adding value” to young people as social commodities.

To better understand the cultural logics at play in the little publics made by youth arts, or the ways that young people are called to express their voices through arts practice, it is useful to think through the processes through which youth performances are made. Part of the way youth arts in schools operate is by mobilizing young people’s knowledges of popular culture and their everyday literacies. This utilization of popular literacies is democratic to the extent that young people from all classes possess popular literacies, their knowledges can be mobilized through the arts. The little publics created through youth arts performances are local, but they also connect to, and articulate through, global scapes of “youth art/s.” Dominant cultural presumptions that the arts are good for young people, that they mobilize youth at risk for their own betterment and the good of society as whole (Cahill 2008; Hickey-Moody 2013), echo in many youth arts practices, especially those that adhere to, rather than mix, particular genres.

Arts as popular literacy: Making everyday public pedagogies

The democratic valuation of everyday knowledge that is often part of making youth arts work has a history in British cultural studies that is not normally equated with discussions of public pedagogy, yet both scholarship on public pedagogy and early work from the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies are firmly concerned with the use of popular cultural knowledges as a vehicle for democratic voice. Because of this, it seems fitting to explore popular literacies here, as such everyday knowledges are a core means through which young people craft public pedagogies. Williams’s (1963, 1965, 1966, 2001) work on cultural forms and processes as pedagogical, Hoggart’s (1958) call to value everyday literacies, and Willis’s (1977, 1981) discussion of how class is learned through culture and labor are of use here. We need to value everyday, or popular knowledges (knowledges outside “the canon”) as a way of democratizing education and involving those who might be considered on the “margins.” Employing popular literacies and cultural forms as a political strategy for engaging marginalized bodies, and advancing calls for education as a democratic project and means of advancing “public good,” later became core to the ideas of public and popular pedagogy.

A framework for valuing everyday and popular knowledge can thus be drawn from a conversation that began with Richard Hoggart’s (1958) *The Uses of Literacy*, a text that John Hartley describes as having “set the agenda for a generation’s educational and disciplinary reform” (Hartley

2007, 1). *The Uses of Literacy* offers an account of Northern working-class life in Britain, in which Hoggart reads “culture” as the experiences and habits of being part of “everyday” community life, as opposed to “popular culture” and popular (mass produced and widely distributed) publications. As the fields of audience studies and new media studies demonstrate, with the rise of new computer technologies and producer-user (Bruns 2006) media forms, the distinction between mass-produced and electronically distributed cultural forms and “ordinary” community life is no longer necessarily as useful as it may have been in 1957. The grounds on which such a distinction might be drawn have shifted. However, the need for educators to think through the importance of considering the classed nature of practices of literacy, and to value “everyday” literacies, endures (Savage and Hickey-Moody 2010). At the time, Hoggart claimed his focus on “ordinary” literacy was anti-Marxist, but to my mind it has clear parallels with critical literacy theorists’ (Shor 1980; Freire and Macedo 1987; Giroux and Freire 1989; Giroux 1988; Turner 2008) calls to engage students with the language(s) of their community, state and world. Although the contributions of Hoggart and Williams to conversations about cultural studies and education are worthy of a more extensive treatment than I am able to offer here, I want mainly to note that these thinkers mark one kind of origin for considering popular literacies as a way of engaging marginalized learners. Youth arts projects constitute an ideal vehicle for such a project as they work with young people’s everyday tastes.

Arts projects created in schools often mobilize texts from popular culture, a process that is partially grounded in young people’s pleasures and tastes. For example, performances are set to popular music and often modeled on the trope of the high school musical popularized within mainstream film. The arts offer one instance of learning via popular literacies and they make little publics that are called to hear and respond to adult and youth voices, expressing genre specific images of healthy young citizens. When a young person is involved in composing a dance routine or a pop song, they are required to draw on their knowledges of, and tastes in, popular culture—although critical reflection on these tastes is not necessarily a constitutive feature of practices of composition. Working with, and incorporating, the popular cultural tastes of students from marginalized and excluded social groups becomes critical when working with students from socially disenfranchised or minority groups. School dance curriculum and many extracurricular youth dance projects offer examples of the amalgamation of popular cultural forms into processes of teaching and learning. This inclusion of popular cultural forms in youth dance practices is not necessarily a process designed to enrich student’s critical awareness of their own taste, however it is an example of an educational process that mobilizes student knowledge and student taste as *youth voice*. These aspects of young people’s lives are core to processes of teaching and learning through the arts.

Youth arts practices and school arts curriculum are generally optional extracurriculum activities for young people, which are not likely to succeed without young people's choice to invest in them. Further, at more senior levels, school arts curriculum subjects are selective areas of study, the pursuit of which obviously reflects youth taste and agency. Thus youth arts practices and curriculum utilize popular culture, but must also be considered *popular* to the extent that they are chosen. The articulation of youth arts practices and youth arts curriculum as either forms of disciplinarity or modes of activism ("education" vs. "schooling") are site specific and these processes occur simultaneously—both political slants on these forms must be recognized, as youth arts practices and curriculum create and promote particular forms of subjectivities and social relations. For example, performance texts created with young people in schools often bring together young people's knowledges of popular commercial music and dance with teachers' perspectives on how they feel their students should present themselves and what they think youth arts should look like. Popular literacies—knowledges about dance moves, different bands, musical styles and their meanings—are core to the ways young people communicate about arts. They are knowledges that are central to how youth arts texts are composed. Yet teachers ultimately have a final say in the work that makes it to the stage and as such, the youth voices created in school performance pieces are partly performances of adult ideas about youth because the teachers are shaping, monitoring, and censoring their student's work.

Popular pedagogy is a classroom-specific version of the strain of public pedagogy that is concerned with what popular culture teaches. *Popular pedagogy* is a term that refers to the classroom-based analysis and use of popular cultural texts. Kenway and Bullen (2001) use the noun to describe practices that involve the use of popular culture and ordinary knowledges in the classroom. To the extent that they are educational practices that involve the valuation of common forms of knowledge, popular pedagogies can be read as classroom-based versions of early British cultural studies theorists' arguments that we need to value "everyday" literacies and knowledges (Hoggart 1958; Williams 2001; Willis 1977) as a way of engaging students who are on the edge of schooling systems. As such, there is a relationship between the idea of popular pedagogy and the strand of public pedagogy concerned with critical analysis of messages in popular culture. Both lines of inquiry are concerned with mobilizing roles that noncanonical knowledges and students' tastes and pleasures play in the formation of subjectivity and the production of belief systems. Both concepts read pedagogy in a liberal sense, as a culturally specific process of teaching and learning. In the different forms these ideas take, public and popular pedagogy draw on a history of critical education (DuBois 1973; McLaren 1989) and are strategies for using education as a form of social inclusion. Broadly speaking, I agree with the politics of these ideas. However, I want to critique the idea of social inclusion to the

extent that it recreates a concept of a privileged group. Working with little publics as a concept opens out and activates the politics that the term social inclusion signifies, but does so in a way that shifts focus from including youth in a dominant paradigm to having the possibility of youth creating their own dialogic space which might speak back to a dominant paradigm, or might acquiesce. Multiple little public spheres can be conceived as living alongside each other and young people's inclusion in them is constitutive—it is required in order for them to exist.

As te Riele (2006) has shown us, the term *inclusion* privileges an existing social structure from which some youth are excluded. Although strategic engagement with discourses of dominant cultural forms is required in order to have a position of use in educational theory, the assumption of the hierarchy embedded in the idea of social inclusion brings with it models for thinking about young subjectivity to which I am opposed. These models are exemplified by the “at-risk” youth discourse, which constructs specific young subjects as deviant. As Dwyer and Wyn (2001) and Kelly (2001) show, the “at-risk” youth discourse needs to be understood as a governmental strategy that reproduces select young people as deviant and thus in need of control. Youth art projects are often a means of governance developed in response to such risk discourses.

The experiences of citizenship that accompany the formation of little publics of youth arts are constituted through pleasure, disciplinarity (a theme I expand on below through a critique of social inclusion), and affective responses to broad social imperatives for young people to have socially readable identities. Berlant (1997), Warner (1992, 2002), and Riley, More, and Griffin (2010) argue that experiences of pleasure need to be considered as forms of citizenship which can be as powerful in terms of shaping identity as a person's legal citizen status. Youth arts and school art projects are, in part, exactly such a pleasure-based citizenship. There is often great satisfaction in being disciplined enough to rehearse and perform, or make and show, a work.

Similarly youth performances created in schools often become vehicles through which adult ideas of youth voice are shaped. Both discourses of youth at risk and the school are largely ways that adults control young people, or ways youth choose to govern themselves. They are also ways of contributing to the “public” as a sphere and valuing everyday literacies as a way of engaging the socially marginalized in processes of schooling.

Youth agency and adult influence: The institution as author?

Schools and community arts organizations craft different kinds of audiences and in so doing they shape the little publics to whom youth arts speak. The role of youth voice in drawing together what I call a little public is crucial, as I want to argue that little publics are, by constitution, spaces in which

young people are heard. Recent research focusing on youth civic engagement has explored some ways youth voices contribute to public debate. For example, with reference to the context of young people's use of digital technologies (writing wikis, blogging, podcasting), Rheingold (2008) argues that community-based processes of creating texts give young people a voice. Rheingold suggests that involving young people in the collaborative creation of texts that are displayed for public consumption not only shapes youth voice but also cultivates a sense of engaging with the public sphere. He contends that the acts of preparing a text for public consumption and engaging with issues of civic concern shape youth voices in modes of public address. Rheingold explains,

Young people protest that “having your say” does not seem to mean “being listened to,” and so they feel justified in recognising little responsibility to participate. ... These trends suggest the importance of social scaffolding for any interventions involving self-expression—other peers in the class and the teacher must act as the first “public” that reads/views/listens and responds. ... It isn't “voice” if nobody seems to be listening. (Rheingold 2008, 98–99)

A parallel argument can be advanced in relation to youth performances, which I argue constitute youth voice to the extent that they are witnessed, or youth voices are heard. Rheingold goes on to explain that,

If literacy is an ability to encode as well as decode, with contextual knowledge of how communication can attain desired ends—then “voice,” the part of the process where a young person's individuality comes into play, might help link self-expression with civic participation. (Rheingold 2008, 101)

Here, *youth voice* is classified as “the unique style of personal expression that distinguishes one's communications from those of others” (Rheingold 2008, 101). The materiality of a young performer on stage, or of the artwork, or music they create, constitutes exactly such a unique style.

Rheingold's processes of using digital technologies to craft youth voice involves negotiations between young people and adults; often these can be characterized by adults instructing young people to engage with issues of social concern. Youth arts processes, especially those used in schools and in arts intervention programs for youth at risk, almost always feature the adult direction of youth and, as such, adults, curriculum and institutions play a significant role in shaping what it is that “youth voices” say and the subjects on which they speak. However, there are exceptions to this rule—both in youth arts practices outside schools and in the practices of digital literacy to which Rheingold refers. Youth voice as articulated by youth arts is not always shaped by adults, but instances in which youth voice is witnessed do always make little publics, as do those that are witnessed and shaped by adults—it is the act of witnessing that matters. Certainly some little publics are made by youth for youth, others by adults and youth for youth, others by youth and adults for

adults, and so on. The instances in which youth arts practices occur in school, institutions, adults, and curriculums need to be seen as part of the authorial assemblage that produced their voice.

An enduring investment in notions of public good links scholarship on publics and popular pedagogy to Habermasian notions of the public sphere and post-Habermasian theories of publics (Bruns et al. 2010). As I have argued, there are major distinctions between the natures of the publics formed and/or addressed through various in and out of school youth arts projects. Thinking about youth arts as making little publics allows us to see that the contribution to the public sphere being advanced by youth arts work is not only small in scale, the public addressed is also very selective. The concept of little public spheres also facilitates a materialist analysis of the investments, opinions, values and interests of young people. Multiple little publics demonstrate the spectrum of political investments of young people in ways we need to understand and to which we should respond.

Notes

1. “Seeds are sown, not by virtue of being thrown out at random, but by being so distributed as to take root and have a chance of growth” (1927, 177).
2. The concept of little publics I develop is specific to a broader theoretical project of thinking through the lives of young people. The idea could also be developed to consider civic spaces configured around adults.

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